

The
Dissolving
Circle

Will
Lillibridge

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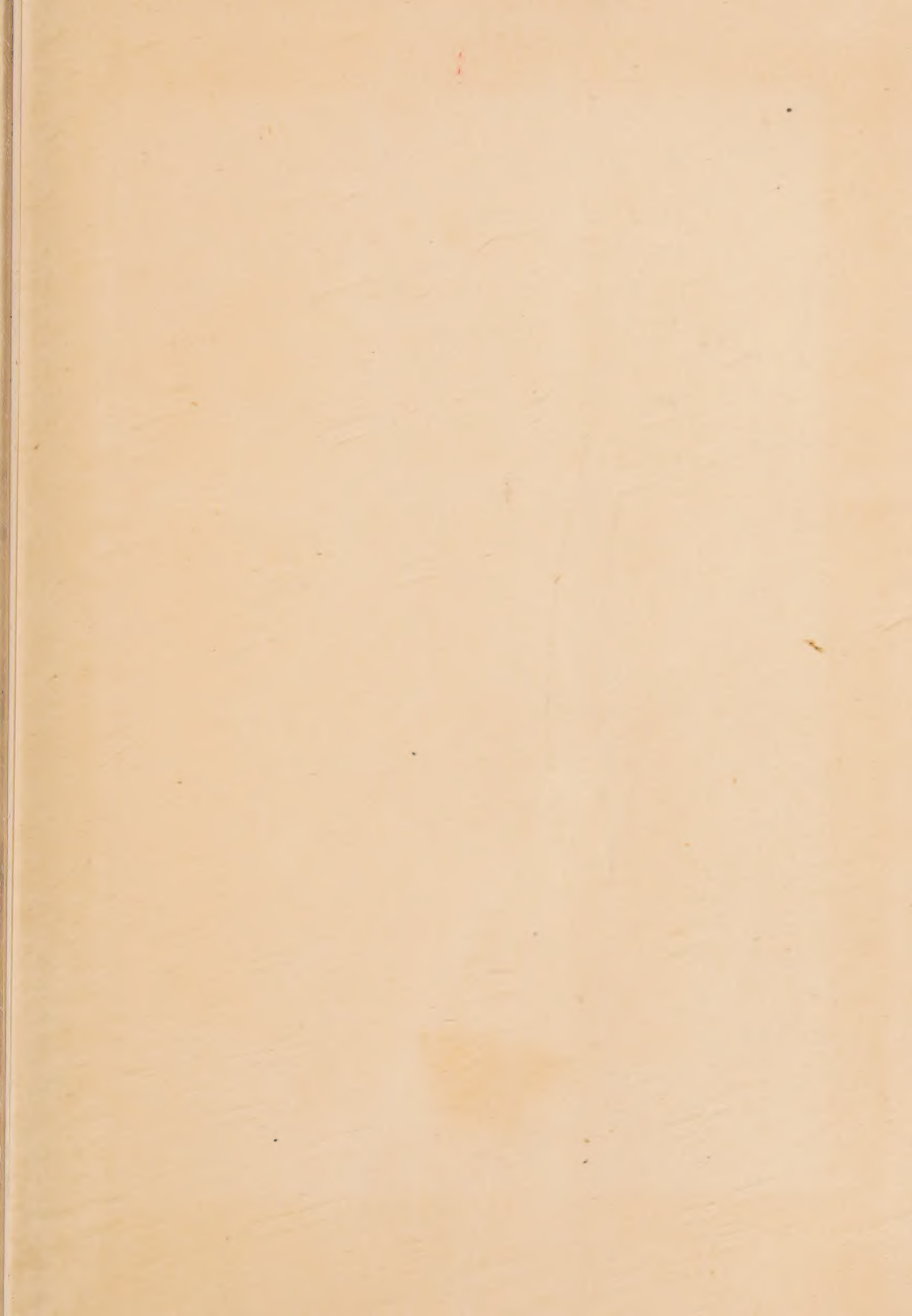
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The Dissolving Circle



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The Dissolving Circle

By

Will Lillibridge

*Author of "Ben Blair," "Where the Trail
Divides," etc.*



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FOREWORD

SIoux FALLS, SOUTH DAKOTA

'As distinctly as individuals, cities have personalities. Gay, careless, defiant, dignified, sordid, sombre, phlegmatic, nervous, restless, up and down the gamut they go, mirroring, as the surface of a sluggish stream the face of the chance observer, the predominant characteristic of those who live within their limits; with age changing slightly, superficially perhaps, but beneath, throbbing on, on for the space of generations with the guiding impulse whose insistent demand gave them birth.

Time was, and to many of the Middle West it seems not long past, when the red man was more than a mere puppet of fiction. In evidence thereof a government, which seldom countenances the unnecessary, established near the junction of what are now three great States, and not far from the confines of a fourth, a barracks. It was the beginning of the age of land hunger, not the fierce, unsatisfied, unsatisfiable longing which now a generation later holds the nation in its grip, which makes the hundred thousand gamble and struggle for tiny tracts their fathers passed disdainfully by, but its discriminating precursor which from a bounty seemingly inexhaustible chose the fairest of the fair.

Westward, ever westward, from the overcrowded, comparatively infertile East came the young men, the middle-aged, the restless spirits, the unsatisfied, the rovers, the adventurers, searching out the secrets of the new El Dorado. Accustomed to frequent farms, and small, to nagging elbow contact with confining neighbours, to soil thin and rock-besprinkled, to stumps and clayey hills, what wonder the reverse, the boundless, all but uninhabited prairie vistas, the soil pungent, brown-black as split walnut to the depth they buried their dead, should have intoxicated them, should have sent them on, on, on beyond railroad terminals, on beyond the trail of the stage, on by the slow passage of prairie schooner, on until very surfeit, like the tardy moral of a feast, brought its realisation that boundless as was the surrounding wealth, each could grasp and hold only a definitely prescribed portion thereof? What wonder again that at last in reactory weariness of endlessly rolling prairies, the comparative bordering roughness of a swift little stream, the suggestion of familiar home scenes in the fringing maples, ash, and willows of its banks should bid them halt; that with the oft-repeated, oft-magnified tales of Indian cruelty and of massacre in their ears the tiny barracks with the handful of regulars it sheltered should have been a potent loadstone directing the point where manifold hitherto aimless trails should converge, that this spot should be the instinctive location of a city of the future?

Like the grain fields which, following the influx of the newcomers, sprang from the surface of the broken sod, a town arose; a municipality which, inevitably as the law of heredity, partook of the nature of its founders, of the character of the land amid which it was born: a town impatient of restraint, sublimely independent, throbbingly vital, ceaselessly active, neutrally tolerant, splendidly optimistic. One by one, greedy of conquest, rival railroads crept converging in as previously the prairie schooners had done, and almost before it was aware of the change the town had become a city.

More potent than ever previous the dominant extravagances of the assembled units came to the fore. On the loom of optimism, of the thread of imagination, boundless confidence reproduced itself. In fancy, just beyond the curtain of a few paltry years, a metropolis, rival of the two then existing in the land, took shape. The spread of the hallucination was universal; the plague was no more contagious. Staid business men became speculators, gamblers. Fortunes like cherries dangled just beyond reach, yet tantalisingly clear in sight. Of a sudden real estate values multiplied like the grains of the field, a dozen, a hundred fold; inflated like mushrooms almost unbelievably in a night. Nothing was impossible; no civic improvement too big to undertake. Through the hills on which the little city was built streets came into being. Cuts like palisades towered above the pedestrians' heads, cuts which after a decade of years

still smile down tolerantly upon the passer by. A flouring mill, largest at the date in the world, arose beside the river's falls. A giant packing plant sprawled upon the prairie hard by. Woollen mills, intended to weave the fleeces of sheep yet unborn, came into being. A linen mill settled itself comfortably near beside. Bevvies of factories, precocious, manifold, awoke to life, tugged at the city mother's outskirts. Surrounding farmers platted into town lots their dooryards, their gardens, their grain fields. If with the coming of a new day, any holder of a segment of mother earth experienced the sensation of a new desire, its gratification in the very, very near future was puerilely simple. Selling values had but to inflate in proportion to the need. It was Utopia to date.

Inevitable as the fundamental guiding law of supply and demand, came the reaction. Marvellous as was the confidence, the impossible would not materialise at command. Paper values shrivelled like maize leaves under the breath of frost. The vacant windows of big office buildings stared hungrily down at the river and the winding valley. The doors of the great mill closed never yet to reopen; weeds sprang up in the stock-yards of the packing plant. One by one the factories felt the death grip of insolvency tightening on their throats. The voice of the sheriff alone was loud in the land.

A decade of years passed by, a period of reconstruction, the sobering lethargy following a debauch.

When the city awoke it was with the clear brain of one who has returned to his own. It had learned its lesson as experience only can teach. Fundamentally, however, it was unchanged. The original characteristics, impatience of restraint, sublime independence, ceaseless activity, splendid optimism, neutral tolerance, were still the blood of its arteries; only never again would the phantom of the impossible lead on to orgy. Once more from being temporarily a puppet in an opera bouffe it had become a living, throbbing personality.

As it was then so it is to-day; a city with a composite individuality all its own, type of the great State of which it is the metropolis, of the splendid country from which it draws tribute. Independent it is in the consciousness of boundless wealth which Nature herself has given and which none can take away. Ceaselessly active for the reason that the work it views undone cannot be accomplished in generations. Tolerant perforce through the assimilation of myriad human types, myriad personalities and idiosyncrasies. Liberally broad inasmuch as no person whose horizon is the meeting of level earth and sky can be otherwise. United she neither is nor soon will be. They who people a new country, though they live side by side, are slow to fuse. Their ambitions are too divergent, they have too much to do. Though she herself has remained silent, her life story has spread on the winds to the four corners of the land. Probably not in the United

States is another city of equal size so well known. Likewise without volition on her part, she is made the scene of an endless social drama, the battle-ground upon which a giant domestic problem is daily fought. Again it is the inevitable manifest. Whether for good or evil the dénouement, it is her virtues already catalogued, and not her faults, which invite the reality. Meanwhile, tolerant, indifferent, the city, the State of whose character she is the personification, sits not in judgment. Unmoved as the brown-red jasper beds upon which she is built, she observes and is silent. Verily she is a personality among personalities, a city unlike any other on earth—Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Chapter I

OBLIGATION

THE man on the pantasote lounge blinked about him slowly, confusedly, and in half-conscious perplexity ran a pair of freckled hands through a shock of distinctly reddish hair. Gradually from wandering the close-set blue eyes fastened upon the long figure opposite, held there; a group of ridges and furrows forming on the brow between.

"Where in thunder am I?" he queried slowly, "and who, if you please, are you?"

The one addressed shifted, revealing a long face, and therefrom pendant a stubby pipe of the variety to which Hibernians show preference. His eyes, likewise blue, tightened whimsically.

"You are in my office. I am Bruce Watson."

Again the fingers combed the reddish hair; but no light came.

"In your office? What manner of office, pray?"

"I am a doctor. A physician and surgeon, to be exact."

A shade, a mere suggestion of understanding, came into the questioner's face.

"And how, to tax your indulgence once more, did I come here?" The alæ of the speaker's nostrils

tightened. "You will understand, I trust, my having a slight curiosity."

Very deliberately Watson pounded the contents of the pipe into a convenient ash tray, and from the tobacco jar near at hand filled the bowl afresh.

"You'd really like me to state the reason in so many words, would you?" Deliberate as before, his eyes found the other's face, fastened there. "Or was that question merely perfunctory?"

The countenance of the man on the lounge grew more rosy.

"I asked because I wished to know."

Again across the littered, unpolished table the two pairs of blue eyes met.

"Very well." Watson scratched a match and drew on the brier until a great cloud of smoke wreathed above his head. "Very well, I'll tell you then. I picked you up on the street so abominably drunk that you couldn't walk."

The jaw line of the red-haired man set like a trap; but he said nothing. Minutes passed; then fumbling in his pocket he produced a watch and studied the face attentively.

"What time was it," he glanced up of a sudden peculiarly, "when I—came into your possession?"

"About a quarter past one, I believe."

"It's now a bit after four. Am I not rather—conscious for one who has been so recently in the state you mention?"

The host's bushy head dropped to the chair back, the latter retreating likewise in sympathy.

"I used a stomach pump and—some other things on you."

Again for the space of minutes there was silence. At last the visitor sat up.

"I'm not fool enough to fail to realise," he volunteered, "that I've made a most absolute ass of myself and that I'm not ameliorating the situation any now; but as long as we're into it we may as well have the whole story. My name's Tracy, Norman Tracy, and I'm stopping at the Cataract." A halt and again the peculiar look. "Perhaps, though, this is no news."

"I knew who you were—your name, I mean."

"To the point then." Despite an effort to the contrary the flush had reappeared. "By what happy chance am I indebted to you for playing the Good Samaritan?"

One after the other Watson's feet elevated to the surface of the table, the spring of the desk chair creaking interrupted protest at the shifting weight.

"It was mere accident. I happened to be coming along Ninth Street when a policeman, you probably know the big fellow here on this beat, was just fishing you out of the gutter. I took it for granted you'd rather not spend the night at the city's expense, and induced him to permit you to come with me. That's all, I believe."

Again the wrinkles deepened between Tracy's eyebrows.

"All except the most interesting part, the tale of the coercion."

Watson puffed on indifferently.

"I swore you had an apoplectic fit, if that explains."

"And when he tested my breath," in spite of himself the visitor's eyes dropped.

"I reminded him that I had already explained the difficulty."

Apparently satisfied, Tracy's glance shifted about the room, took in the half dozen cane-seated chairs, vociferously new, the pine table which was also a desk, the operating stand of galvanised iron, the few obviously second-hand sheep-bound text-books, returned to Watson himself.

"I think," the inspector arose a bit unsteadily, "I'll rid you of my presence. In future it will be unnecessary for anyone to explain to me the feelings of a prominent citizen caught red-handed robbing his neighbour's hen roost." Of a sudden from red the face went pale, the close-set eyes tightened.

"Self-extenuation compels me to say, however, that this is offence number one of the kind in my life. Explanation bids me add that of all the curses in a man's life, woman——"

"I"—the pipe left the doctor's mouth, but otherwise not a muscle of the long body moved. "I—beg your pardon."

Tracy drew up, all but with a jerk, the chin of him lifted, the eyes took the downward slant of one who fancies he faces an inferior. Out upon the street the door of a hack swung to with a crash and upon the granite pavement the cab horses' shoes beat a diminishing tattoo. The white slowly left the visitor's face.

"I am at present your debtor and for that reason overlook the—interruption." Slowly he approached the table. "Be assured I'm thoroughly grateful for what you've done for me to-night." Hesitatingly a card dropped amid the litter.

"If in future I can reciprocate—or—should there be a bill——"

Puff, puff went the pipe.

Tracy hesitated, made as if to extend his hand, thought better of the idea, and thrust it in his pocket, moved toward the door.

"This is the way to the elevator, I presume?" he digressed.

Once more the spring of the desk chair spoke protest.

"Yes, but I fear you'll have to use the stairs. In this building the car stops at ten o'clock."

The visitor swung half about.

"What floor is this, please?"

"The sixth."

Surprise that grew into astonishment unfeigned flooded the alien.

"And you—carried me up here?"

"I was raised among men," indifferently.

Usually so facile, the tongue of the other had nothing to say, and he turned again to the door.

"Good-night."

Watching the departure twin wrinkles tightened Watson's blue eyes anew.

"Mr. Tracy——"

"Yes."

"Are you quite sure you wish to go—now?"

The other looked a question.

"Certainly. Why not?"

Watson picked up a journal from the table and spread it comfortably upon his lap.

"I thought perhaps you'd rather not, was all."

"But why?" Again the eyelashes were inclined downward.

The magazine was pressed open with a deliberate hand.

"There's a mirror in the corner to your right." The wrinkles expanded into a smile, a broad, frank smile. "Our streets are not kept as clean as they might be."

Involuntarily Tracy glanced in the direction indicated.

"Damn!" The voice was expressive, all-including. The owner returned to the seat on the lounge. Very near to our self-respect is our apparel.

"I guess," the voice was propitiatory, "I'll have to tax your good nature a bit farther. Won't you lend me a clean suit; we're about of a size."

"Delighted, but for one reason. I cannot—conveniently."

With one motion Tracy's hand went to his pocket, returned with a roll of greenbacks, banged in emphasis on the board beside the uplifted feet.

"I'm no pauper, nor asking favours for which I'm not able to pay. I'll buy a suit of you, at any price you see fit to name."

For the space one could count ten slowly there was not a sound in the room. The wrinkles left the corner of the doctor's eyes, the nails of four big-jointed fingers on the chair arm went white, the steady puff of smoke ceased. Then again a cloud of blue curled toward the ceiling.

"Your deductions are a bit hasty," commented an even voice. "Because there's a skeleton in the lower drawers of this table is not proof positive that I'm a cannibal. Unfortunately I have but one suit of clothes, and that at present is in active use."

Tracy's hand, grasping the crumpled bills, returned to his pocket as though detected filching from a contribution basket.

"Watson," he halted, "I—beg your pardon. I'm not myself to-night. Forget the insult, please."

His companion nodded compliance.

"I had no intent of doing otherwise. Life is too short to waste in quarrels over nothing." He stood up and stretched like a cat from a nap.

"You'd better go to bed. I'll get your clothes myself in the morning."

Tracy glanced around him unwillingly, helplessly.

"You sleep here too, do you?" he queried sceptically.

Once more the wrinkles had resumed their place.

"Yes." One of the new cane-seated chairs went to lengthen the pantasote lounge. "I beg pardon for disturbing you." From behind a curtain in one corner of the room came a roll of blankets and a pillow. A pair of clean sheets followed and in the space of seconds a very inviting bed lay awaiting an occupant. The host returned to his seat and tilted the reflector over the single incandescent globe so that half the room was in shadow.

"I'll fix you out in time for breakfast."

Tracy had risen and observed the arrangement without a word. Now at its completion he watched the other man as he impassively took up the neglected journal and for the second time filled the anything but fragrant pipe. There was an intensity in the inspection which for long he had not directed to any object animate or inanimate; a something deeper than interest, for at its close beneath the thin skin the muscles of the tightened jaw showed distinct. Slowly his freckled fingers went through his hair. Equally slowly his eyes shifted to the door, to the inviting white of the sheets revealed beneath the turned-down blankets, to his own disreputable-looking person; lingered there meditatively.

"And you?" he suggested at last coldly.

"Don't worry about me. It's nearly morning.

Besides, I wouldn't have gone to bed to-night anyway."

Once again there was a pause, then against the background of silence came the suppressed sound of a man disrobing; the impact of two shoes one after the other on an uncarpeted floor, a muffled curse as the bare foot came in contact with the cold linoleum, an unconscious sigh of satisfaction at the welcome touch of clean linen; last of all the interrupted, stertorous breathing of an alcoholic.

Chapter II

THE LETHE CLUB

WHEREVER the place on the surface of earth men congregate, whatever their incentive of gathering, like inevitably find like. In evidence, of the evening following, in a second-floor back room of a building fronting on Phillips Avenue five men were lounging, almost huddling, about the blaze from an open gas grate. Supposedly the place was furnace-heated, but though the season was late October, in spirit of landlordly economy the radiators were cold. The apartment itself was thoroughly isolated. Two windows, opening to the rear, looked out fair upon the surface of the Big Sioux River. The expanse of water, leaden grey from depth and held motionless by a big dam below, added to the chill all surrounding, blended with the sodden sky, with the leafless straggling maple skeletons which partially screened the brown country beyond. Connecting the room with the staircase, which in turn descended to the street, was a long corridor, without skylight and in consequence always partially dark, but nevertheless barred to intruders by ground-glass. Yale-locked inner and outer doors. Within the room itself was a single rug of ample proportions and with some discolourations, an assortment of wicker chairs, a long library

desk littered with the daily papers, the recent magazines, a half dozen late novels, a silk hat and a walking stick. In a niche near the mantel a buffet exhibited a goodly stock of liquors and cigars.

Of the five men forming the straggling crescent, one, reddish of hair, freckled of hands, we already know. The others, similar editions in blonde and darker skins, ostensibly prospective citizens of South Dakota, like Tracy himself, in confidence acknowledged various Eastern residences, and would almost as readily have considered suicide itself as of fulfilling their oath of State allegiance. Together, men and room, the tradition which caused their approximation, the whole had a name. Migratory as waterfowl, here but for a few brief months, the humans themselves had little to do therewith. Coming, they accepted it without question; leaving, it remained behind them, legacy to the newer group of pilgrims. Meanwhile in the dragging months of idleness it fulfilled its mission. Though to a majority of the citizens of the town its existence was unknown, it had nevertheless been an institution for years, bid fair to continue life indefinitely, to endure until the by-product of an age of social unrest should cease journeying to this particular shrine. It was the Lethe Club.

However it might be ordinarily, on this particular evening the name of the organisation was a flagrant misnomer. Nowhere on the continent were five men more restlessly wide-awake, more insistently desirous

of action, of excitement. They lounged one and all; but in frequently shifted positions. At last Irving Barry, round-faced, massive of girth, farthest from the blaze, drew closer irritably.

"Confound that janitor," he grumbled, "he must think we're lumber jacks—or Esquimaux."

The others, a moment before equally morose, now in the perversity of human nature, smiled broadly.

"Your blood's too thin is the trouble," commented March, a dapper little man with a high forehead, a well-kept moustache, and a boutonnière. "You need exercise, an interest."

"An interest!" sniffed the other. "In charity's name show me one! The Lord knows I've searched therefor diligently." He straightened and clasped his plump hands between his wide-spread legs.

"I've visited the penitentiary and the brewery. I've seen the falls and gotten a pass through the Queen Bee mill. I've heard the local sage explain how to live a hundred years, and stood the smile of the *prima donna* until I fell into a fit. I've——" The voice paused and the round face relaxed into a grin. "On the square, though, gentlemen, joking aside, the accusation is true. I'm simply spoiling to have something doing."

"I think the need is mutual," commented Marsh drily. "The thing we're waiting for is a suggestion."

Tracy arose and walked toward the buffet.

"I was just about to make one." He poured a

generous drink of whisky dramatically and sent it down raw. "What's the matter of initiating a new member?"

The boy-man nearest the mantel, Phelps by name, sloping-shouldered, with faded blue eyes and a receding chin, hitched sarcastically in his chair.

"Nothing so far as I can see," an ironic pause; "that is, nothing save a total lack of material."

Tracy came back to his seat.

"I think," he refuted, "the lack you mention is more imaginary than real."

For a moment and as one man the others observed the speaker.

"Another of love's young dreams faded, eh?" satirised Phelps finally. Rising, he stalked over to the windows and with a jerk drew the shades over the outside greyness.

"Confound that sulky river," he digressed in extenuation as he lit the gas. "It's giving me the blues. By the way," he resumed, "where's the candidate from?"

"Rather inquire as more important," laughed Marsh, "how long before his sentence expires."

Tracy glanced about the group unsmiling.

"The man I have in mind lives here in Sioux Falls."

The one member who thus far had not spoken, a dark, graceful man of uncertain age, with a muddy complexion and an abnormally nervous manner, drew out a book of rice paper.

"Has he," a cigarette took form, swiftly, mechanically, "the prime requisite for joining this illustrious society?" The sarcasm which one and all used as a mask to cover their present purpose sprang instinctively to his lips. "I've noticed that most of these townspeople bear their conjugal burdens in unprotesting silence."

Tracy's face was still non-committal.

"The man's a bachelor."

Phelps' hands went out in a conscious gesture of mock dismay.

"Heresy, heresy," he protested histrionically, "gentlemen——"

Interrupting, Barry shifted his chair away from the fire.

"Are you in earnest, Norman?" he queried directly.

The other's close-set eyes tightened, his arms folded unconsciously.

"I certainly am."

"Who's the man, then? Let's hear about him."

Tracy leaned back absently, too absently. A half minute passed.

"As I said," at last monotonously, "he's a bachelor—about thirty I should say—a doctor who offices in the Minnehaha building across the way." Languidly, again too languidly, the eyes made the circle of the four listeners. "Where he comes from I can't find anyone who knows. Who he is likewise apparently no one has taken the trouble to find out."

He has practically no practice or associates. Evidently he has had some education, for his English is excellent. He dresses like a rancher or a cattleman, but it seems after all as though the things on his back fitted him." The folded arms loosened, the glance, keen now, repeated the circuit of faces. "He would be, I fancy, a most surprising man in a rough and tumble scrimmage."

There was no languor in the room now, only silence, an anticipatory silence. In it Morley Butler blew a last cloud of smoke through his nostrils, tossed the cigarette stump into the grate, and took a breath of pure air audibly. Stephen Phelps glanced a question at the action, then receiving no response fell to inspecting the toe of his boot critically. Irving Barry alone remained as before, observing his confrère steadily, analytically.

"The description is vivid enough," he commented, "but why, please, the selection? It strikes me from the picture that Mr. Bruce Watson and ourselves would be lacking a bit for things in common."

"And precedent," added Marsh in routine; "there's never been——"

"Damn precedent!" snapped Tracy.

Marsh coloured, and a hot retort sprang to his lips, but Barry, the peacemaker, stepped into the breach.

"If you fire-eaters will keep cool a minute," he smiled, "maybe we'll be able to learn something." He turned to Tracy directly.

"On the square, Norman, why is it you wish to take in this man Watson? You haven't told us the story yet."

The other threw out a hand impatiently.

"I've repeated everything I know. We've got to recruit from somewhere now and then, haven't we? You yourself, you realise, in a couple of months now——" The speaker paused suggestively, and the grin on his face was reflected to the others. "It's deucedly hard to replace you, old man, but I'm doing the best I can."

A moment Barry sat smiling in good-natured tolerance of the badinage, then rising, he moved over to the rack and selected his top coat and hat deliberately.

"I think at this time," he digressed easily, "I'll see what Providence has provided for dinner. Anyone else going along?"

Swift as the sun slips behind a wind cloud the smile left Tracy's face. Twin wrinkles dug deep furrows between his eyes.

"You'll vote before you go, won't you?" he demanded. "We can't elect without."

Barry got into the coat slowly.

"I'll be very glad to when I hear the rest of the story." He drew on one glove judicially. "As I said before, I'm spoiling for something to happen, and as far as I'm personally concerned I'd just as soon help initiate the Sultan of Sulu if I knew the reason." He pulled on the other glove and stood

waiting. "But in this case that's just the trouble. I don't know the why."

For the space of seconds following there was silence. In it Butler lit a fresh cigarette impassively. Marsh looked from one to the other of the speakers with evident anxiety. Tracy folded his arms as before, then unfolded them again and rising stood with one foot on the cane seat, his elbow on his knee.

"On the square, gentlemen," he admitted reluctantly, "since you insist, I'll tell you why I wish to initiate this man Watson." The chin dropped to the open palm, the other hand disappeared in a trousers pocket. The channels on the forehead reappeared.

"Last night, if you remember, I wasn't with you. I had something on my mind and proceeded to forget it in the approved way." Unconsciously the all but closed lids narrowed. "As chance would have it Watson stumbled on to me and prevented a scene. That's the long and the short of our acquaintance. The things I told you I found out to-day from the other roomers in the block with him."

"I see," commented Phelps as the narrative paused. "A case to date of a grateful recipient wishing to duly reward the hero."

The foot on the chair came to the floor with a bang.

"Grateful nothing! Whatever else I am I trust I'm no hypocrite. Last night it's a fact I did feel decidedly appreciative. I'd have paid him good and

proper, but he wouldn't accept anything, and he was so confounded supercilious about what he did—I might have been a dog or a Dago for all he——” The words had been coming faster and faster. Now of a sudden they ceased and the narrowed eyes flashed openly.

“You have absolutely the last word this time. The man is in crying need of experience, and we have an equal lack of diversion. The occasion is psychological.”

“But after he's been initiated,” protested Phelps quickly, “what then? We're not going to be here long enough to take a savage to train.”

Tracy's lip curled legibly.

“Unless I'm a poor judge of human nature there's no problem of future. You leave the initiation to me. It's my turn to evolve the form anyway, and I venture the prediction that thereafter the Lethe Club will offer few attractions to the candidate.” He turned to the three men at his left directly.

“But enough of this. Let's put the matter to a vote before dinner. What do you say, Butler?”

The man addressed glanced up indifferently.

“The whole thing to me smacks rather decidedly of the fiction number of a family magazine, but as far as I'm concerned, yes.”

“And you, Marsh?”

“I'd be willing to hold a kerosene torch in a campaign parade to-night. Count me favourable.”

“Phelps——”

"I withdraw my objection."

Tracy turned to the man of girth.

"Are you with us, Barry?"

The big man returned the look.

"Just one question more before I vote. Is Watson aware that he's being balloted on?"

Tracy's eyes shifted.

"No."

"Nor probably knows much of anything about us?"

"Probably not."

"Seems to me, then, it would be well to find out if he cares to join before we elect him." Unconsciously the broad shoulders lifted, straightened. "I've learned something about these solitary Westerners in the last four months, and if your description of this particular one is correct, I have a premonition he'll tell us and our dinky little club to go hang; or words to that effect."

"But supposing I take the responsibility of vouching for his acceptance?" pressed Tracy.

"In that case," quickly, "I'm with you to the finish."

The two men observed each other steadily at short range.

"You'll not forget the promise or that it's my lead?" A challenge was in the curl of the thin upper lip.

"No."

In silence Tracy moved over to the buffet and

poured another too generous drink from the red decanter.

"Very well, gentlemen," he commented, "be here all of you by nine o'clock at least." He lifted the glass and glanced about him sarcastically.

"So long as I alone stand sponsor for the newcomer, I'll drink solitary." The red liquor passed between his eye and the light.

"Here's to the candidate!"

Without comment of the action Barry turned interrogatively to Butler and, the latter responding, they left the place together. For a moment after they were gone Phelps held his peace, then curiosity got the better of him.

"Between you and me, Tracy," he insinuated, "what're you going to do to Watson? You've got something up your sleeve, I know."

Tracy came back to the grate and spread his hands before the blaze. His customary mood, restless, bored, impatient, had returned and he did not even look at the questioner.

"Perhaps I have and perhaps I haven't." He shivered a little in spite of the heat. "If you possess your soul in patience you'll find out this evening."

Phelps' weak face tightened doggedly.

"But I want to know now. As a member of the club I have a right——"

Interrupting, Tracy turned half about.

"Whatever else in the world you do, Phelps," he

flashed, "don't nag. It's the unpardonable sin." He hesitated a moment and forced a smile. "I'm not in the mood for explanation just now; I've too many other things to think about. That's where Watson's initiation comes in. It's a case of taking on tight boots." He turned and lifted his hat from the table. "Come on. Let's go to dinner and forget our troubles."

Phelps hesitated a moment stubbornly, then as Marsh arose he, too, followed, and the trio moved across the street in silence.

From their first advent in town the three men had been constant boarders at the "Cataract." A half hour later, as in company they were dining at their own particular table, an A. D. T. boy entered and was directed to them by the head waiter.

"Mr. Norman Tracy," announced the youth in a voice thick with gum, producing simultaneously a telegram and a battered receipt book.

Tracy signed and opened the message leisurely. He read it twice and equally leisurely returned the yellow envelope to his pocket. Despite his will, however, his manner underwent a distinct change. The others could not but note it.

"No bad news, I hope," suggested Marsh politely.

"No." Tracy ate a moment in silence, then glanced at his questioner peculiarly. It occurred to Marsh that the man must be drinking even more than the others knew. "I have an interest in a certain

venture back East. Before I left it looked rather dubious, but just now it's booming."

"Glad to hear it," congratulated Marsh conventionally and the conversation changed.

"By the way," remarked Tracy unexpectedly as a quarter of an hour later he pushed back his chair and tossed his napkin on the table, "I'm going to leave this beastly hotel and take rooms in a private house. I'm dead tired of things."

The others glanced at him in surprise.

"I thought you always liked it here," protested Phelps. "Certainly it's the best place in town."

Tracy made a gesture of aggravated disgust.

"It used to be, but of late it's gone to seed. For one I've got enough." With the air of one who has said the last word upon the subject he arose and led the way back to the lobby.

"Don't forget nine o'clock," he recalled as he stepped into the waiting elevator.

Upstairs alone in his fourth-floor room he locked the door and switched on the light. Characteristic of the man, every chair in the place was littered with something, and seizing the nearest he dumped its burden irritably to the floor and placed it under the drop light. Sitting down he noticed by chance the bare glass of the single window, grey as the dull night without, and rising, he drew the brown shade with a jerk. Returning, he resumed his seat and tilted the chair well back. A moment he sat so, absently vibrating backward and forward; then, slowly extract-

ing the oblong of yellow paper from his pocket, he spread it flat before his eyes. The shrewd, sensual, dissipated face of him was a study as he read anew the few typewritten words:

“NORMAN TRACY:

“Expect me the 30th inst. via the Rock Island.

“EULA FELKNER.”

It was then the evening of October 29th.

Chapter III

CANCELLATION

FOR perhaps three-quarters of an hour, while he consumed a big black Havana until it all but burned his fingers, Norman Tracy sat—except for hand and lip, motionless—gazing with unseeing eyes at the blank wall opposite; and all that time the telegram of one sentence remained as he had spread it out flat upon his lap. When at last though he did arouse it was with an energy which gave no hint of indecision. From a closet adjoining he brought forth a light suit appreciably worn and exchanged it for the brown tweeds he was then wearing. His heavy walking shoes likewise he replaced with low athletic pumps, his beaver with a cap, and descended to the street. On the sidewalk in front of the big building opposite, he glanced up. There was a light in a certain window on the sixth floor, and, ascending, he opened the door leading thereto without form of knocking. Watson was standing in the shadowy oblong background of the window, but at the sound he turned half about, his loose-built frame revolving as on a fulcrum.

“Good-evening,” initiated Tracy.

Watson returned the salutation and indicated a chair. “Won’t you sit down?”

The visitor hesitated a moment, moved over to the table and turned the pages of a magazine absently.

"No, thank you. I came on a particular errand." He adjusted the periodical parallel to its neighbour beneath with an unconscious nicety. "I'll explain what it is if you have a few minutes' leisure."

With the same motion as before, comparable to nothing save a well-lubricated bearing, Watson resumed his original position, gazed out impassively into the prairie night.

"I'm listening."

The lips of Norman Tracy moved, but gave forth no sound, the nicely arranged magazines scattered in confusion. For ten seconds thereafter he stood so, his eyes on the back within the frame.

"To come to an understanding then," he italicised, "you've heard perhaps of the Lethe Club?"

"Yes."

"Doubtless then you know its membership and mission also?"

"A very little of both. Circumstances once called me in contact with the club professionally."

Tracy seated himself on a corner of the desk.

"In what way, if I may ask? I had supposed non-members were strictly barred."

Watson faced about slowly.

"I believe they are ordinarily, but this was an exceptional case. I was called, they politely informed me, because I was the only doctor in the directory

who was in his office at the time wanted." Once more the back came into view. "I used five stitches, as I remember."

For a half minute Tracy's free leg ceased in its vibration back and forth; then like a pendulum it began anew.

"I've heard of the incident you recall. By the way, did it reach the papers?"

"No."

Involuntarily Tracy smiled. He was not without a sense of humour, and in the light of the other's revelation his own mission took on an unexpected spice.

"Since you know then who we are and what we are, it simplifies my errand." Just appreciably he paused. "I have the honour to invite you to become a member of the club. Your name was considered, and favourably, to-day."

For a long minute which dragged into another the room was as though vacant. The silence and the delay got on the visitor's nerves.

"You heard me, did you not?" he asked the back impatiently.

This time the other moved. Slowly, very slowly, and silently as an Indian he took the few steps between the window and the desk chair. Though the floor was bare linoleum his footfall caused scarcely a sound. His whole body was like one complicated coil spring. He sat down and motioned a chair opposite.



"Her lithe body pressed close; throbbingly close"

"Be seated, please."

Again Tracy hesitated. He had a premonition that the unexpected was about to take place and felt somehow at better advantage where he was.

"I'm very comfortable here," he temporised.

"Besides, I've an engagement."

"I asked you to please be seated."

Tracy took the chair indicated. Why he did so it would be difficult to say, but he did.

Watson leaned back in his own place, the great bushy head of him topping the chair back, his chin buried in the folds of his soft brown flannel shirt. From beneath long lashes his blue eyes, wide set, candid as a child's, looked the other immovably.

"I've noticed as I've journeyed through life," he commented evenly, "that invariably when people give they expect something, somehow, in return. You've just offered me something. I've a curiosity to know just how you expect me to repay the debt."

Tracy smiled tolerantly.

"For once," he refuted, "I think you've met the exception which proves the rule. So far as I know absolutely nothing is expected of you save your society. The club is of necessity constantly casting about for new members to fill unavoidable vacancies, and your name was mentioned as eligible. That's all there is to the story."

"Eligible?" Watson caught the dominant word. "Eligible! Doesn't that impress you as a trifle misapplied?"

"The club vote on the matter was unanimous."

"I'm a resident."

"We're all attaining residence as rapidly as possible."

"You're uniformly married men."

"That disability likewise we are without exception attempting to remedy."

"I'm poor as the proverb."

Tracy's gesture was all-expressive, compellingly adequate.

"You're organised for the sole purpose of murdering time, without quarter."

Tracy straightened. He hadn't even hoped for anything so easy as this.

"A little of the same medicine is good for anyone. Even a steam engine will balk unless it's given a rest now and then."

The long lashes closed over Watson's eyes and opening again did so but half way. His great chin lifted from his chest, stood forth like a sign post whose message the running might read.

"Mr. Tracy, we've wasted time enough juggling commonplaces. The farce of the club plural aside, what is your reason for wishing me, a stranger and an alien, to join? Let's understand each other for once."

As much as the colour of his hair the histrionic was a part of Tracy's nature. With the motion of a grateful boy he leaned forward. His eyes moistened.

"Frankly, Watson," there was almost a throb in the voice, "since you insist I admit you're right. To the club you're a stranger, but I feel somehow as though I'd known you a very long time. This morning when I left, you made light of the affair of last night; but nevertheless it was a mighty big favour you did me, and I'm grateful. I think you'll like us and our club when you become acquainted, but if, after joining, you don't, you can drop membership at any time of course. I hope you'll understand, I——" He looked away.

The thing was well done, so well done that it deserved a larger motive. Just where conviction was lacking, to touch the exact point of deficiency,—His glance returned, found that of the other upon him; the same look as before, from half-closed eyes, but smiling now, tolerantly sarcastic, wholly understanding. Irresistibly the blood of uncontrolled ancestors flushed like a flame to Tracy's face. He sprang to his feet, his hands still grasping the chair back. His lips opened, but he did not speak; for with the first motion Watson too had risen, stood facing him, the chair between.

"Mr. Tracy," it was the voice the doctor would have used to a patient; deferential, non-committal, "I appreciate your motive—I think—and thank you." The sarcasm had left the eyes now, the old wide, almost childish expression had returned.

"In the light of last night and what I know of the Lethe Club I feel quite sure I understand. Un-

der the circumstances it seems to me the part of a cad to do but one thing." He paused and gracefully, deliberately, as though athirst and the thing proffered were a glass of cold water, accepted the challenge unmistakable in the visitor's face. "I accept with thanks."

In the commonwealth of South Dakota at that moment there was one man at least taken absolutely by surprise, absolutely off guard. Tracy's look was as though by accident colliding with a lamp post, the latter had begged his pardon. He groped.

"You—accept, you say?"

"Certainly."

Unconsciously one of the visitor's hands jingled the coins in his pockets. An instant before he was so certain the other realised—everything; and now—— The coins lapsed into silence.

"And you're ready to join, to be initiated, whenever you're called on?"

"Yes."

Tracy's shoulders, narrow, sloping like those of a woman, lifted. His lip curled into a smile.

"By gad, old man," he confided familiarly, "you gave me a jolt. I thought from the way you came at me you were going to refuse." His normal air of assurance had returned and he laughed easily. "I admit I proposed your name, and the fellows would have made life miserable for me if you hadn't accepted."

Watson reflected the smile.

"I assure you I had no such thought—when I understood."

Tracy hesitated, decided for the present it were better to accept the seeming victory.

"Thanks. But I've stayed now longer than I intended." He took up his cap and started briskly toward the door. Hand on knob he paused.

"By the way," the tone was elaborately casual, "have you anything on this evening?"

"Nothing of particular importance."

"What's the matter with our putting you through to-night then?" On the surface no suggestion could have been more spontaneous, more disinterested. "I believe there's time yet to get a working force together, and I suppose in your line it's difficult to set a positive date ahead."

Apparently the satire fell on barren ground. The blue eyes remained clear as a prairie sky.

"I'm at your service—providing the engagement you mentioned——"

As before, the visitor's gesture was all comprehensive.

"It's only a short one. I can be around by say—nine. Will that be convenient?"

"Perfectly so."

Once more the freckled hand on the knob tightened.

"All right, consider it settled." The speaker paused, stood a moment inspecting the long figure precisely as it had first risen, and for the same reason

that he had sat down at command the smile on his lips vanished. Instantly following, telltale, irresistibly, flooding, maddening the hot blood mounted the pitted cheeks, reached up to the shadow of the cap. The door closed behind him.

Early as it was, for Tracy went straight to the club rooms, only Barry was absent when he entered. A different air than usual, however, was upon the place, an intangible something out of the ordinary. Contrary to their usual custom the men were neither gambling nor reading. The green-topped table in the corner was in shadow, the red and blue bridge decks remained as they were left in the afternoon. Only Morley Butler, the inveterate, was smoking. Without comment or apology the newcomer walked direct to the buffet. When for the second time he filled his glass, Phelps and Marsh observed each other knowingly. They winked.

Tracy flung his cap on the table and sat down. Butler smoked and breathed audibly. Phelps inspected the pattern of the paper on the ceiling. The silence was ominous. Breaking it, Marsh arose and stretched himself elaborately.

"There are just four of us here," he stated obviously, "let's have a rubber at bridge." He moved over to the well-worn table and turned the bulb to a ground glass globe above. "Come on, you lazy animals."

Phelps responded with alacrity. Butler tossed his

cigarette stump into the grate and arose indifferently. Tracy alone kept his seat.

"Won't you play, Norman?" queried Marsh directly. "I've been reading up in a new manual since dinner and have acquired some tricks I wish particularly to try on you." His smile showed a beautiful row of teeth beneath his black moustache.

"They'll break you sure as—the divorce crop in Dakota. I have the author's assurance."

Tracy glanced up, but made no motion to comply.

"I'd be delighted to accommodate you, I'm sure, but I don't think we have time." He indicated the big electric clock above the mantel.

"There's business ahead, you know."

Once more behind his back Phelps and Marsh exchanged looks. One after the other they returned.

"You were really in earnest, then, about initiating that—barbarian?" queried Phelps sceptically.

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes."

"And he agreed?"

"He promised to be here promptly at nine; in fifteen minutes now."

Phelps stroked the oval of his chin irresolutely.

"It strikes me, the more I think of it," he demurred hesitatingly, "that we ought to go a little slow in this affair. It's all right, I suppose, from your personal point of view, but it's asking the rest of us to chop off our noses to spite another's face. It'll spoil our club sure as thunder if he sticks."

Tracy said nothing.

"And as far as I see there's nothing to prevent his staying," the speaker went on with a trace of heat. "I for one am in favour of reconsidering while there's time."

Still Tracy said nothing.

Phelps glanced at Butler appealingly, but the latter had returned impassively to his seat. Marsh, likewise abstracted, had his hands deep in his trousers pockets. The second-hand of the clock went around and around. A step sounded far down the stair, halted at the outer door, then at the inner. Barry entered.

Big, well fed, round-faced, there was nevertheless in the swing of the newcomer's step, in the toss with which he threw his coat on the rack, indication of the restless discontent which was growing on him day by day; which deliberate inaction of mind and body inevitably brings to the man accustomed to doing things. Quick to note the unusual, he flung himself into a seat and looked a question at the assembled group. His glance paused at the speaker of a moment ago.

"Out with it, Phelps," he invited understandingly, "or if it's already escaped, repeat, please, for my benefit." His eyes tightened whimsically. "Has some other benighted tradesman demanded cash in advance?"

Marsh smiled at the suggested recollection, but Phelps did not.

"No, I don't give them the chance any more," he

retorted hotly. "I wouldn't buy even a linen collar here now if I had to have it sent out from New York by special messenger. I was just trying to reason with Tracy against letting in this man Watson he says he's going to initiate to-night, but he won't talk."

Barry glanced at Tracy and the facetious wrinkles about his eyes smoothed.

"He really accepted, did he, Norman?" he queried incredulously.

"It's about time for him to be here now."

"You see," broke in Phelps, "if we're going to reconsider we've got to be about it."

The big man's glance hung a moment longer, then of a sudden he stretched himself.

"As far as I'm concerned," he drawled, "I see no reason to reconsider. I supposed the matter was settled before dinner."

"But at least," pressed Phelps, "you have an opinion of the fellow, of his fitness?"

One of Barry's plump hands went to his mouth and he blinked as a man will who yawns. For the first time Tracy was observing him steadily and the big man caught the look. Something therein held his attention, and for the second time the lines about his eyes smoothed. Imperceptibly the air of indifferent indolence left him. Instinctively the others felt the change, felt that somehow the seemingly trivial incident had taken on a new aspect, one vitally personal.

"You ask if I have an opinion?" He was looking

at Phelps, but even the latter realised that it was not to him that the reply was directed. "Most assuredly I have, and an emphatic one. If any man who knows who we are, what we stand for, has no more ambition, no more of something I won't name, than to wish to join us, has any desire to barter his birth-right hourly as we are doing, has any inclination to degenerate daily as we likewise are doing, I for one say let him come." In the rush the voice paused for breath. "An anomaly like that deserves the worst he can receive, the worst we can help to give him. I repeat, let him come."

Listening, Marsh and Phelps shifted unappreciatively, but in silence. Morley Butler smiled grimly to himself. Only Norman Tracy remained non-committal. With a meaning look his eyes went to the clock. The hands pointed directly the hour, and in deliberate confidence perilously near a pose he arose and, hands in his pockets, stood listening. The others, even Barry, caught the attitude, waited expectant. A moment passed; then, without a premonitory tap upon the stairs, a knock sounded at the outer door, and was repeated. Answering, Tracy's chin lifted, his lashless lids drooped, a look which mirrored the calibre of the man, innately malicious, fundamentally sarcastic, flashed over his face.

"The play," he commented, "runs smoothly to-night." His eyes shifted in ironic indication of an imaginary stage-wing. "He comes."

Chapter IV

THE INITIATION

SAVE Tracy, who admitted him, the men were seated when Watson entered. In turn as they were introduced they arose and shook hands perfunctorily. The form complete, Tracy drew two chairs close to the table and, himself taking one, indicated the other with a wave of his hand. Ordinarily erratic, there was no trace of indecision in his manner now. From out a drawer beneath the table he produced a leather-bound register and a fountain pen. Turning over perhaps a dozen pages swiftly, he came to one but partially covered with names, and pressed the sheet flat with the palm of his hand.

"So long as we all know what we are here for," he began curtly, "the sooner we proceed to business the quicker you will become one of us." He removed the cap from the pen and laid it beside the open page.

"First of all, please, register." Slightly, very slightly, the corners of his mouth twitched. "If, sometime, you'll take the trouble to look back, you'll find that your name is in very good company. There's more than one title on the preceding pages."

The candidate made no comment, and Tracy slid back his chair until his face was out of the direct light from above the table.

“We have no stereotyped initiatory work,” he resumed as Watson completed his signature, “and bind no member to secrecy. It is supposed any person honoured with admission will respect the confidence. But one requirement, the least possible to ask, we do demand. Any candidate, before he receives duplicate keys to the inner and outer doors, must prove himself worthy of them. He must take oath, and be willing to make good that oath, that he is the equal of the men already members, that wherever they lead he is not afraid to follow.” The voice paused and out of the shadow the speaker’s eyes, so near set that now they seemed like the twin barrels of a shot gun, sent their challenge fair into the other’s face.

“Are you willing to take this oath?”

For a moment Watson hesitated, and in it the gaze of the four spectators vibrated from principal to principal. Little as they knew what was in Tracy’s mind, they realised that beneath the query lay possibilities infinite, that directing it was a definite motive and a sinister one. Inexplicable as it was, chance, throwing these two men in contact, had straightway made of one the other’s enemy. Fantastic as the suggestion seemed, it was no product of the imagination. It was a reality, flaunted itself incontestibly before their eyes. With something more than mere curiosity, a wonder as to how much or how little understanding Watson had of the situation in which he had deliberately placed himself, they watched for a clue in his manner; but none came. He laid the pen he was still holding

back on the register and settled himself more comfortably in his seat.

"If I understand you correctly," he verified evenly, "in speaking of the test you suggest you used the word follow. Do I gather correctly that there is precedent for whatever you have in mind?"

"There is, or will be."

Watson accepted the qualification indifferently.

"The assurance is sufficient. I accept."

Without a word Tracy arose. Moving over to the table he closed the register deliberately and returned it to its place. From a companion drawer he produced two keys and laid them side by side upon the polished table top. Still in silence he turned on the gas in the grate, temporarily extinguished, and applied a match. It sprang into flame with a muffled explosion, and Morley Butler started nervously, but apparently Tracy himself took no notice. The light was still burning over the card-table, and as he moved over and extinguished it, that corner of the room leaped into shadow. Passing the rack on his way back he picked up his cap. Then for the first time he paused, his arms folded.

"Mr. Watson," he said, "we are going to take a little—air. When we return the keys there are yours." He turned to the mystified four, and though his eyes made the circuit they paused on Barry. Unconsciously his lip curled and his head with the old trick tilted back.

"Are you ready?"

For a moment not a man stirred. Like chance auditors of a sudden called upon for a speech, they knew not what to say, what to do. So long as Watson alone had been the one in suspense, the uncertainty was at least novel, but to be themselves involved was a very different matter. Insistent as air, memory of the leader's promise of precedent, with its infinite possibilities, sprang to their minds. Recollection of their own tacit agreement to take active part in the initiation followed close in its wake. Of a sudden the modestly furnished room with its quiet and its seclusion offered attractions of which they had never thought it possible.

Tracy took a couple of steps toward the door meaningly.

"I repeat, gentlemen, I'm waiting."

This time there was action. Almost simultaneously Barry and Morley Butler arose, and with the swift interchange of glances which had become a habit, Phelps and Marsh followed. As they were putting on their top-coats Tracy turned curtly.

"Leave them off," he directed. "You'll not want unnecessary clothing to-night."

Again Phelps and Marsh passed looks, but the other two men obeyed without a sign. Tracy noted the acquiescence, and reading it correctly the curl of his lips broadened. Lover of excitement as of life, willing to pay for it any price, even personal friendship, as in a game of poker, there could not be too many individual rivalries aroused. Leading the way

to the door he swung it wide open and waited until the others had filed through. The second door he closed, but sprung back the lock and followed Phelps in the rear down the ill-lighted stairs.

Within the building the men had not noticed that the temperature was changing, but now outside the fact was called sharply to their attention. The uncomfortable chill of day had developed into the damp, penetrating cold of evening. Instead of lowering, the wind had risen, and as they stepped from the protection of the doorway on to the street, a gust, laden with the dust of ill-kept streets, slapped them in the face like a gritty, unclean hand. Overhead the network of telephone wires droned monotonously. Near by the glaring sign of a saloon squeaked protestingly on its fastenings. Tracy in advance observed the latter approvingly.

"Thanks," he appreciated, "a good suggestion," and he led the way to the bar.

Within the room was a company typical of the night and place; a half dozen shrewd-eyed, unshaven hack drivers, several young would-be bloods in vociferous neckties and with evil-smelling cigars pointing toward the ceiling, an old rounder with a congested nose and a stomach straining at the buttons of his trousers. Tracy indicated the ensemble with a wave of his hand.

"Step up lively, gemmen," he invited with a swagger and a well-simulated leer. "Beastly cold night. Have som'thing with me and my friends."

At first there was hesitation; then the old tippler came forward and the others followed. Out of the tail of his eye the masquerader glanced at Barry to his left, but the face of the big man was a blank.

Tracy ogled the barkeeper companionably.

"Pickwick's mine," he suggested.

Up and down went the order until every man was supplied.

The host lifted his glass.

"Here's hoping"—a deliberate pause until the others, thinking that all the toast, drank—"that we may never meet again," he completed malevolently, and drained the liquor.

For a moment there was silence, then as suddenly as had come the insult an angry growl, ubiquitous, ominous, filled the room. Instantly as wind lifts a fog the air of the inebriate left the city man, and stepping back he met menace with equal menace, defiance with defiance. For a second he stood so; then his hand went to his pocket and a banknote dropped upon the board in front of the dispenser of drinks.

"Keep the change," he said; and very sober, very self-contained, now led the way to the door.

Outside he offered neither comment nor explanation, but in the teeth of the wind moved up the sidewalk. Not a half block away another sign, creaking like the first and identical but in name, sent forth its invitation of light. Directly beneath he halted and

observed Watson with obvious silence. If he expected hesitation, however, he was to be disappointed. The doctor did not even pause for a glance, but as though the invitation had been voluntary, led the way within. Lined up as before in front of the bar he turned deliberately and glanced about the room. Save for the old toper, the scattering loungers might have been the identical ones they had just left. Deliberately as he had turned, Watson's blue eyes made the round, man for man, until one and all he had their attention; then without a word his big bushy head made a motion of all including, almost all compelling invitation to join. Without a second look he faced back once more and leaned impassively against the rail.

Following a lull that by comparison made loud the drone of the night wind without, the ticking of dust particles against the big plate glass windows, filled the place. But one man in the room failed therein to send an unspoken question to his neighbour. That one remained as he had turned, remained and waited—waited until to the last individual, his invitation was accepted. Then for the first time he spoke.

“Rye, any brand,” he ordered.

Once more he paused until a glass was in every other man's hand before he lifted his own.

“Gentlemen,” he said quietly, “here's promising that as I never have done so before, never will I again ask another man to take liquor.”

Hesitatingly, with oblique glances between man

and man, they drank, and like the patter of rain the empty glasses returned to the board. From somewhere in the depths of his pockets Watson produced a well-worn bill and spread it flat before him. Watching and having heard the man's history, Barry could not but wonder against what rainy day that particular certificate had been saved. Of a sudden the note shot forward a foot and its former owner straightened.

"Keep the change, barkeeper," he directed, "and devote it to charity." Catching the sudden sarcastic smile on the other's aggressive, smooth-shaven face, his own lit humorously.

"Remembering always that true charity begins at home," he added as he turned to leave.

There was no lack of saloons in the central district, and in grim silence the six went the round. At first they created but a passing interest, for the bizarre was the rule in this town and speedily forgotten; but at last even its fundamental indifference was aroused. Gradually, and apparently casually as gathers a pack of timber wolves behind a solitary wayfarer, a group of loungers with turned-up collars and flapping arms collected and followed in their wake; stopped outside and peered through the windows of the places where they stopped, slowly yet constantly augmenting, moved on when they moved. Inappreciably, slowly as well, as an ensemble, the air of the revellers themselves altered. Insidiously changing, the farce of inebriety with which the riot

had begun became other than a farce, its silence one of rigid repression. Instead of tacitly following, Marsh and Phelps were now well to the fore. Beneath his breath the latter hummed a music-hall ditty, and during intervals of waiting executed fancy steps on barroom floors. Hitherto a prelude, the game itself was on.

Starting down Phillips Avenue, Tracy had led the way across a block and moved back gradually on Main, the street adjoining to the west. The advance so far had consumed more than an hour, and as the group and its attendant train reached Ninth Street they met the full outpouring of the theatre on the corner. A buffet, the last resort in the vicinity, next to the play-house door, was Tracy's destination, and abandoning the congested sidewalk he started angling across the street. The roadway was littered with waiting hacks and, well in advance with Watson close behind, crowding between two cabs, which stood close in line by the curb, he fairly collided with a lady hurrying to enter the carriage to his right. With exaggerated courtesy he drew back and lifted his cap.

"I beg your pardon. I——" The apology halted abruptly and of a sudden ended in a laugh.

"Well of all the wonders!" he digressed broadly. "Here for months I've been trying to get in touch with Mrs. Thurston and now in an unguarded moment and without volition upon my part, my fondest wish is fulfilled. It's like the play."

The black eyes of the woman flashed in tolerant amusement.

"Wonders indeed are at large to-night," she echoed sarcastically. Her glance followed the tortuous line between the waiting cabs to the interested knot recruiting now rapidly, as a crowd will ever gather about a nucleus. "What, by the way, are you playing; run, sheep, run? My curiosity as well as wonder is aroused."

Again Tracy laughed, but his red face flamed.

"Yes-s." Of a sudden beneath the irony the bravado in his character, ever so near the surface, took complete control. "Yes-s, just wait a moment and you'll see us go. It's a splen-did pastime." Then as unexpectedly again, under stimulus of malicious inspiration, the mood shifted.

"But before we go I wish you to meet my friend Mr. Watson—I beg your pardon," with an elaborate bow to the man behind—"Dr. Watson, physician and surgeon, excellent hand with that dark-brown taste. Permit me: Mrs. Thurston, from New York City: Bruce Watson, M. D., from South Dakota. You'll be great friends, I know. You have so much in common."

This time the flash of the black eyes was of positive displeasure, the unconscious rounding of the nostrils a menace.

"I trust, Mr. Watson," she acknowledged quietly, "that I may have the pleasure of meeting you again—under different circumstances." A glance sin-

gularly penetrating inspected the other from foot to head, paused under compulsion as upon introduction ninety-nine out of a hundred glances had always halted at the candour of the wide-set blue eyes. "I think possibly we might be better friends than this meeting would seem to indicate."

In silence Watson lifted his hat and with a faint smile the woman entered the cab quickly and was gone.

For the fraction of a minute following, and motionless as the building before him, Tracy stood watching the carriage as it rambled down the cobbled street; then of a sudden his hand went to his throat, worked impatiently at the binding collar. Equally unexpectedly he turned back the way he came, and as he passed Watson saw that his face had grown livid to the lips. Back to the end of the line he stalked, back until the crowd of interested spectators forced themselves to his attention, and stopped. Once more his hand went to his throat and tugged until the band of linen ripped. His face, malevolent as that of a savage, faced the spectators squarely.

"Come on, you perverts," he challenged with a great oath, "you carrion-hunting prairie kites! Come on, if you wish to see the sport!" and down the incline toward the river, fair in the centre of the street, he started at a swift dog trot; Watson and the others trailing at his heels.

Chapter V

ABANDON

To repeat, at the risk of becoming tedious, Sioux Falls, small but throbbingly cosmopolitan, fundamentally indifferent, was accustomed to unexpected vagaries. Through long succession of manifold experience with a restless, supercilious class, vauntingly transient, she had grown *blasé* to the unconventional; but this night was an exception. Somehow, in the inexplicably rapid way scandal travels, word of the revelling six had gone ahead; and against all precedent, despite the wind and the cold and the flying dust, the sidewalks were thronged like those of a country village before a circus parade. The doorways of the darkened office buildings were crowded with the curious seeking temporary shelter. The windows of the brilliantly lighted drug stores, saloons, and restaurants became lined with rows of expectant faces behind which busy fingers plied handkerchiefs vigorously to remove the vapour which condensed on the cold surface almost as rapidly as removed. At the south aspect of the big hotel shades raised like the lids of many opening eyes, and beneath lifted sashes faces of men and women peered forth.

Where the multitude of curious had collected

from no one stopped to explain. Just what they expected no one knew. Word, a vague word of the unusual, had come. Above on the hill a great crowd had gathered; a crowd that rumbled in many voices which they, the watchers, could not distinguish, and was silent, and rumbled again. Ahead of it, leaving it, save for a few stragglers who like flotsam followed in their wake, a group of men, the first three in file like Indians on the warpath, the others following in disorder, were coming at a run. The incline was decided and as they approached they came faster and faster. Silent themselves, the shouts of the accompanying rabble began to grow distinct. Spectators in doorways caught up their cries and with clapping hands passed them on.

"'Rah for the divorcees!" they appreciated.

"Police! police!" but not a bluecoat was in sight.

"Long live firewater!" roared an unknown in a voice like a factory siren, and the irony caught.

"Firewater forever!" they laughed and clapped louder than before.

Meanwhile, apparently oblivious that a spectator was within miles, still fair in the middle of the street, glancing neither to the right nor left, went grim-faced Tracy with long Watson seemingly pasted to his heels and the others following as best they might. On to the intersection of Ninth Street and Phillips Avenue he went and turned south; on down the avenue to Tenth and again switched east; on between wholesale houses and across railroad tracks; on where

the paving ended and native mother earth swallowed up the steady pat, pat of his footfalls; on until the river itself was reached and a bridge loomed like a skeleton in advance. Then, still without a pause, still without a backward glance, he did the unexpected. Instead of taking the planked roadway he shifted far to the right and under full momentum started clambering up the incline to the narrow steel trestle twenty feet overhead.

For the fraction of a second the man following hesitated. Had an observer been where no observer was they would have caught a sudden tightening of the broad nostrils and a simultaneous intaking of breath that was not from weariness. Had they known him intimately, as likewise no one did know him, they would have realised to the full the ironic chance which as from inspiration had selected his most stubborn instinct: unreasoning terror of altitude. Then had they still been there they would have seen the long body crouch like a giant cat preparing to spring or a bull moose to charge, and with eyes glued to the shadow of the back ahead, go up steadily, hand over hand, knee over knee, up until the incline merged into a narrow black ribbon extending ahead a little way dimly and then merging into darkness.

Likewise just for a moment as he reached the summit of the span Tracy paused, clinging to the iron beneath his knees like a monkey. He had no terror of height, but the empty blackness revealed ahead

made his flesh creep. Despite the liquor he had drunk his nerves were on edge from the night before, and in that vacancy he fancied he saw anything, everything; products of fancy more horrible than any reality could have been. Of a sudden as he halted he had the impression that one figment, more malevolent than the rest, had drawn close, had laid a heavy hand upon his shoulder and in jeering pantomime indicated the rocking, menacing, dead black surface of the river forty feet beneath. Instinctively he recoiled, and with almost a feeling of hope sent a glance of inquiry beneath his arm. Perhaps, more than perhaps, probably—Not three feet behind him, impassive, waiting, Watson was returning him look for look.

As at the last moment before the theatre again the man's face went livid. The hot blood spurted through his body as from an opened artery. His fingers tightened like the talons of a hawk on its prey.

"Not enough yet, eh?" he flamed. "Come on then, damn you; and God have mercy on your soul if you fall!"

From that time on neither spoke a word. Slowly, feeling his way foot by foot, Tracy led the pace and long Watson followed; his eyes never for a moment glancing down, never for an instant leaving the deeper blackness of the other's back. Clear of the banks the full force of the north wind, a very gale now, caught them fair, tugged at them like sinister fingers reaching up from the black depths beneath.

It was growing steadily colder and ice was forming on the surface of the steel. Tracy wore gloves, but Watson's hands were bare, and he could feel them gradually growing numb. When first his damp fingers had touched the dry under surface of the narrow plate he was traversing they had frosted and left the cuticle behind; then came the steady flow of blood, and he noticed the bite no more. Now and then a gust of wind stronger than usual, mingled with powdery snow and sleet, seemed like a puff of smoke to fairly take the men's breath away, and for a second they would pause and gasp for very life; then with a muttered curse sounding above the whistle of the storm and the clash of the river against the piers, Tracy would lead on, and like an avenging shadow Watson would follow; hand grip for hand grip, kneefall for kneefall. How long it took them to unroll that black ribbon they did not know. Whether any or all of the other five were following they likewise had no knowledge, for with the coming of the descent and the measuring of the last foot Tracy had swiftened his pace and, silent again, leaped into the roadway and the swinging jog trot of the approach.

Then on again afresh they went, the two of them alone now, down an incline until the level of the district was reached, over more railroad tracks, between lumber yards, brick yards and warehouses, following the irregular street convenience had formed parallel to the river's bank. As everywhere on the

east side, the light was inadequate, the roadway littered with all manner of impedimenta and, where unpaved, cut deep from the wheels of heavy trucks. In addition the footing was becoming treacherous from the gathering ice, and the gait of they who ran took on the uncertainty of the inebriate. Once Tracy in advance slipped and fell with a curse; but getting up he went on faster than before, on apparently as though he intended going miles, on as if his own soul's salvation was at stake, on until between him and the river only a single railroad track intervened. Then, as suddenly as he had changed tactics at the bridge, he stopped and whirled about. He was panting like a racehorse coming under the wire, and beneath the summer suit the light from the street lamp across the river showed his chest rising and falling visibly. A second he faced the other so; then slowly he began to take off his coat.

"My friend," he halted between gasps, "can you swim?"

Very quietly Watson removed his coat likewise and began to unloose his heavy shoes.

"I have never tried."

"Not raised—near water—eh?"

"Not within a hundred miles."

Tracy's coat and vest were on the ground, his bare shirt sleeves billowing in the wind.

"Looks nice and—deep down there," he was getting his breath again, "deep and wide. Think one could dive from here safely?"

Watson made no comment.

Tracy hesitated and even in the half light the other could see his face work.

"Like to take a lesson, would you?" The voice was a growl; the look which accompanied it vicious as of a wild beast. "I had a long-distance record once."

Again Watson made no comment. His taciturnity was maddening.

Forgetful that there was no collar there now to bind, Tracy's hand went tugging to his throat. With another movement he threw his cap to the ground and tramped it with his feet. Like a flag of danger his stiff red hair waved in the gale.

"Come on, then," he challenged with a sudden leap down the steeply inclined bank. "Follow me if you dare, and before God I hope you'll never reach the other bank." Gingerly he broke the thin ice already forming along the shore; then like a duck going to water leaped far out and with long, sure strokes aimed for the light which marked the city proper. Halfway across he turned on his back and looked the way he had come; but on the river's surface, as he was, he could see nothing. He tried to listen, but the flapping of the water under the wind cut off every other sound. For a minute he floated so, waiting, undecided; then once more he forged ahead at full speed and in the darkness and the storm clambered up the opposite bank without a backward glance.

The rooms of the Lethe Club were precisely as Tracy had left them when Phelps and Marsh, first to return, came apologetically within and with chattering teeth sought the welcome heat of the grate. For five minutes they stood before the blaze in silence, each industriously rubbing his hands and each waiting for the other to speak. At last Phelps, impatient, cleared his throat with unnecessary vigour.

"Well," he insinuated, "I hope you and the other fellows are satisfied now." The effect of the liquor he had drunk was wearing off and he was in the mood of a petulant child. "By to-morrow morning our names will be in every mouth in Sioux Falls, and by evening all over the country, copied in the home papers and everywhere else."

Marsh flung himself into a seat and turned down his collar.

"Granted, the last part," he echoed curtly; "but in admitting we're asses please include yourself. Don't spring the 'more righteous than thou' attitude to-night."

"Include myself!" Phelps swung around angrily. "Include myself! Well, I should say not. I did the best I could to prevent your going, didn't I?"

Marsh tugged at the ends of his moustache in silence.

"I repeat, I did my best to prevent you all going foolish, didn't I?"

The other made a gesture of repressed dissent.

"Go on," he temporised. "I don't want to quarrel with you."

"But answer me, quarrel or no quarrel."

"Yes, then, you did the best you could—perhaps." A sarcastic pause. "But nevertheless you went along, didn't you?"

"I——"

"Answer *me*, this time. I repeat, you went along?"

"Yes, a——"

"And sang and kicked up your heels while the rest of us laughed."

They were both standing now and spitting at each other like strange cats in an alley.

"Yes, a fellow—don't interrupt me till I get through, I tell you—a fellow with any nerve whatever couldn't do otherwise when the rest of you——" Of a sudden he paused at a look on the dark face so near. "What are you laughing at?" he demanded.

"Nerve, eh!" Marsh's black moustache fairly bristled with sarcastic mirth. "Bragging of nerve—and you here!"

Phelps' face went crimson.

"Well, you're here, too, aren't you?"

"Certainly, and when I begin to pose——" He went off again, in a gale of real mirth this time, and the atmosphere cleared. They both sat down.

"Speaking of publicity, though,"—this time Phelps carefully avoided the former bog,—"I'd rather my

house had burned down than had the affair of to-night happen. It'll get into the New York papers sure as thunder; the editors jump at every scrap of scandal from here, and back home they'll read——"

"Who'll read, your wife!"

"Wife nothing!" A look of sublime contempt for the other's dulness flashed over the oval face.

"My wife can read if she wishes and be blest, it's not of her——"

"Oh, I see—I—see!"

Involuntarily Phelps' face grew redder and redder. He wished to be angry, but somehow he couldn't.

"Well," he defended doggedly, "I'm no worse than the rest any way." His voice lowered, and he glanced swiftly at the door. "Tracy himself for that matter, if he'd ever anticipated the crowd——"

Marsh drew closer. The quarrel of a bit ago was forgotten.

"Tracy," he suggested, "I never knew——"

"Well, I did and"—again the surreptitious glance at the entrance—"and, confound him, it serves him right. He told me all his troubles one evening; he was all to pieces at the time and about three sheets in the wind. He's going to the devil by the shortest route these days."

"Yes, yes; we all see that." Marsh bit at his nails impatiently. "But the story. I'm interested."

Phelps shifted in his seat uncomfortably.

"Some other time I'll tell you. He'll be coming now soon, and if he heard us——"

"Coming nothing! He was wound up for two hours when we left him down by the bridge. What is it?"

For an instant Phelps' mouth set stubbornly; then the temptation grew too strong.

"Well, to pack it small, it seems that when he and his wife broke up finally—they hadn't lived together for years previously and he'd spent most of his time in Chicago—she was so glad to get rid of him that she promised if he'd cut out and get a divorce decently and not get her name mixed up in public she not only wouldn't oppose him, but wouldn't even ask for alimony."

"Gad, I don't blame her," commented Marsh. "He'd be cheap to lose at any price. But go on, where's the girl come in?"

Phelps looked at the other frostily.

"I was just getting to that, but if you——"

"Pardon me. Go on."

"Well, that's just where the fun begins. He met her in Chicago and passed himself off as an unmarried man. She doesn't realise to this day so far as I know——"

Marsh slapped his thigh explosively.

"Gad!" he repeated in interjection, "this is rich. She knows, of course, he's there, and when she reads to-morrow, sees his name with 'divorcé' at the head of the column—— But a hundred pardons, I didn't mean to interrupt."

Phelps' glance was more icy than before.

· “The real complication I hadn’t told you,” he suggested maliciously. “But under the circumstances——”

“Oh, pshaw, I won’t do it again. Go on.”

For the second time the ice thawed, but less readily than before. The voice lowered.

“The nib of the thing is this. Not only did he misrepresent himself, but he stepped into the shoes of another fellow—Tracy is fascinating as the devil with women when he wishes—cut him out when he was already engaged solid to the girl.” The speaker paused as though that was the end of the story.

“And the other man?”

Phelps was positively uncomfortable now. Too late he realised that already he’d told more than he should.

“I ought not to repeat that. It was confidential.”

“But I won’t tell.”

Phelps got up and walked back and forth for a minute. Then he sat down.

“The other man, between you and me, is what’s sending Tracy these days to the bow-wows. It seems he was a student from the West some place taking a course at one of the colleges when he met the girl and they became engaged. He was a poor devil, and after he’d graduated he returned home to make his fortune. It’s the eternal story repeated. While he’s gone Tracy slides in. You see the point?”

“Yes.” For some reason both of the men had

become serious now. "Tracy and he, I judge, have never seen each other?"

"Exactly, and Tracy for one doesn't intend they ever shall. He didn't tell me so precisely, but he intimated that things were ominous when the engagement was first broken."

"I see." Marsh was stroking his moustache again fiercely. "I see. He didn't mention, by the way, any names?"

"Names!" Phelps' face formed into a sarcastic grin. "Names! Did you ever play Norman Tracy for an absolute fool? Names!" Of a sudden the voice paused, and face and body lapsed into an attitude of exaggerated ennui.

"Damn! I'm cold yet," he shivered meaningly.

But it was not Tracy who entered. It was Irving Barry, and a moment later Morley Butler followed. Both men had their hands deep in their trousers' pockets, both were shivering like a maverick in the teeth of a blizzard. In silence Barry drew up to the fire, but Butler first went to the buffet and with a hand which trembled lit the inevitable cigarette. As he returned Phelps, warm and comfortable now, eyed the two newcomers amusedly.

"Well, you certainly are a happy-looking pair," he satirised. "Where, pray, are Tracy and friend?"

Barry paid no attention to the query, but Butler turned half about.

"I don't know."

Phelps laughed openly.

"Don't know, eh?" He winked at Marsh appreciatively. "Your nerve failed too, did it?"

Butler made no reply, but it required an avalanche to suppress Stephen Phelps.

"Which way were they going, then, when you left them?" he pressed.

There was an appreciable silence.

"I wasn't aware that I'd made the confession you intimate."

"Oh." The obvious appealed to the boy-man at last. "I—beg your pardon."

After that conversation lapsed. Barry sat in the mantel nook stolid as an oyster. Butler, equally silent, hitched his chair closer and closer to the blaze until the smell of varnish was pungent in their nostrils. Marsh and Phelps, ostensibly indifferent, took up magazines; but after the first minute and until eighteen by the clock had passed by, neither turned a page. Then almost simultaneously two sheets went over noisily. Next moment Tracy entered, alone.

Exaggeratedly unconcerned, the readers, one after the other, glanced up; then in genuine surprise the periodicals dropped. Involuntarily also Butler arose, and even Barry whirled about in open-mouthed astonishment.

"Well, of all the drowned rats!" blurted Phelps. "Where, in Heaven's name, have you been, man?"

Ignoring the question, even by a glance, Tracy took the place Butler had just vacated. Without coat or vest or cap, dripping still and mud-stained, a punc-

ture in the toe of one shoe ejecting water like a fountain with every move he made, he faced about and one by one included every man in the room in a slow glance of sarcastic contempt. Almost immediately under the heat his clothes began to steam and at his feet a little puddle of water grew larger and larger. Five minutes passed before Phelps recovered from his first rebuff; then again he found his voice.

"Where's Watson?" he asked abruptly.

Tracy stepped aside a half foot to avoid the gathering puddle.

"I can't tell you." He looked at the questioner sourly. "At the bottom of the river for all I know."

As usual when the trivial becomes serious, Phelps subsided, but in his corner big Barry straightened.

"Was that a joke?" he asked evenly.

Tracy wheeled half about.

"Do I look as though I was in a mood for humour?" he countered.

"No."

"You have your answer then."

Involuntarily Barry half rose from his seat; then with an effort he sat down again.

"Pardon me, Tracy, if I take you at your word," he said coldly. "What did you do to Watson?"

Again Tracy wheeled.

"And pardon me if I answer with a question. Why weren't you along to see?"

Barry's big good-natured mouth closed in a straight line.

"We'll not discuss that now. I repeat my question."

"And supposing I decline——"

"You won't when you think it over a moment."

Tracy hesitated, and the meaning of the other's insistence appealed to him. The vestige of a scowl left his face.

"You must think I'm an Apache," he defended reluctantly. "I didn't do anything to Watson, of course. The last time I saw him we were on the other side of the river. After that I swam across, down below the Eighth Street bridge, and came directly here. What became of him I don't know."

Barry cleared his throat deliberately.

"Your first remark, then, was a joke after all?"

Tracy moved a step farther away from the blaze. His clothes had ceased dripping now.

"Perhaps it was and perhaps it wasn't." His lashless eyes were of a sudden fastened upon the questioner fairly. "Watson informed me, if it would interest you, that he'd never tried to swim in his life."

For a quarter of a minute Barry returned the look.

"And you didn't wait to see what he did, how he came out?"

"I most emphatically did not."

Of a sudden Barry was on his feet, tumbling into his top-coat.

"Tracy," he flamed menacingly, "you don't deserve the consideration, but I'll go back there to Eighth Street and look about myself before I notify

the police. If I don't find Watson though, or he isn't here when I return——"

"You may." All at once Tracy had grown very much at ease.

"You think——"

"I know——" the old insolently sarcastic smile had returned to the thin lips, "I know—that you're an ass, Barry. Watson's on the stairs right now."

Chapter VI

THE AFTERMATH

THE doors had purposely been left unlocked and through them came upon the scene a brand new actor: Bruce Watson, dominant. Save for the damp spat of his stockinged feet his passage through the hall had been noiseless. Only the scraping of his stiffly frozen trousers legs, each against each, broke the silence of the room as he entered. Except that at the finger ends the blood had clotted, face and hands were clean. By no action or mannerism did he show the slightest trace of feeling; yet even blundering Phelps read as though high in the sky the warning of his transformation, and was silent. Bruce Watson aroused was animate ice.

In continued silence and with five pairs of eyes following him like those of so many daguerreotypes he advanced across the room. He was carrying under his arm a parcel like a small bucket wrapped in paper, but at the table he stopped and setting it down folded his hands over the top. Deliberately he looked from spectator to spectator.

“You were waiting for me?”

Three pairs of the curiously expectant eyes shifted to Tracy meaningly and responsive the chin of the leader went up, his eyelids down.

“Yes and no. I for one was warming myself.”

"In preparation for additional tests of—nerve?"

Tracy forced a smile.

"No, the initiation is over."

The fingers with the bruised tips changed position, upper for lower.

"You're quite sure the results so far have been entirely—adequate?"

Involuntarily Tracy thrust his hands into his trousers pockets; then, at touch of the steaming dampness, removed them disgustedly.

"Yes."

Watson leaned a bit forward over the table.

"Pardon my being insistent, but I don't wish the future to bring any question. You're morally certain that I've proven myself worthy of membership to this club, worthy of your individual society?"

Tracy's red face grew visibly redder. He remembered the bridge and the river bank—and was not comfortable.

"Yes," he repeated.

"Thank you." The long body drew back. "There would seem then to be but a single consideration remaining before I accept the latchkeys and make myself at home. Does that one occur to you?"

Tracy drew his hand across his face absently. He began to feel like a gambler at roulette when the ball commences to slacken speed.

"No."

"So?" The broad arch of Watson's eyes lifted. "I shall have to inform you then." Once more he

inclined a shade nearer. "Without paraphrase it's whether or no you, Norman Tracy, the self-announced arbiter, are a capable judge, have yourself the qualifications demanded. Is the logic at fault?"

Slower, slower went the tiny ball and the red-haired man felt his muscles tightening.

"No," he said again.

"Thank you once more." The voice was icily courteous. "I presume you are willing, more than willing, to settle that uncertainty immediately?"

The purr of the marble was silent and Tracy knew that he had lost; but spectators were watching.

"Assuredly I'm willing," he echoed mechanically.

Very gravely Watson inclined his head in acknowledgment.

"I had no doubt you would be, so I came prepared." His stiffened shirt had thawed now and one after the other he hitched the sleeves well toward the elbow. "I'll only keep you waiting a moment." One of the long arms swept back the magazines until the corner of the table was free, the other removed the wrapping from the something he had brought with him and it stood revealed, a corrugated steel can about a foot high by eight inches in diameter, and enameled fiery red. Watson set it firmly in the centre of the open space and unscrewed a button on the top.

"I nearly always make it a point late in the fall to go goose hunting," he explained minutely, "and for that kind of shooting I prefer to use bulk powder and to load my own shells."

His raw fingers were bleeding afresh and the screw turned slowly.

"This season I laid in my usual supply of ammunition, but for certain reasons did not use it." At last the cap had loosened and tilting the can he allowed a few drams of the black granules to sift into his hand. "I have no doubt it is good, but we'll make sure." Bending over he tossed the sample deliberately into the grate. Instantly there was a flash and a report and a cloud of smoke, flame, and asbestos wool. The next instant there was a yell as from a band of routed Sioux, and Phelps and Marsh were struggling in an effort to simultaneously make exit through the narrow doorway.

Watson straightened, and for a second looked after them in tolerant surprise, then slowly he shifted about. Tracy was no longer in front of the grate, but with teeth set and breathing hard was standing well to one side, his hands gripping the rounds of the chair back. Morley Butler too had risen and was staring at the can as though it were a red devil approaching at top speed. Barry alone, his face very white, was sitting as at first.

The doctor hitched up his sleeves afresh.

"As I thought," he remarked laconically, "it is good." From amid the crumbled wrappings he withdrew a stout cord.

"Unfortunately for our experiment," he chatted on, "I have no fuse, but I think this will do." He stretched the twine to its full length, and taking one

end thrust it through the opening far into the can. The other free end he left dangling over the edge of the table.

"Mr. Tracy," he requested without looking up, "will you oblige me with a match?"

There was no response and after a moment Watson straightened.

"Might I trouble you for a light, please?"

Tracy aroused, almost shamefacedly.

"Certainly. I——" He began a vague search of his damp pockets.

"Thank you, Barry." The doctor struck a light, carefully selecting the under surface of the table that it might leave no scratch, and applied the blaze to the frayed fuse end. It lit with a flame, seemed for an instant to go out, then burned slowly on. For perhaps a minute Watson watched it with folded arms, then he drew a chair into the circle.

"It will take that cord, I judge, ten minutes to burn." His head indicated the open box upon the top of the buffet. "May I take the liberty of taxing my credit with the club to the extent of cigars all around?"

As before the request was directed to Tracy, but it was Barry who nodded permission, and when a moment later Watson tendered the box the acceptance of the red-haired man was as automatic as though taking place in a dream.

As carefully as he had scratched the first match the doctor lit another and, sitting down, applied it

to the tuck of his cigar. His damp trousers bound at the knees and, loosening them, he stretched his long legs comfortably. Minutes passed while Barry from his corner watched intently for another move; but none came, nor another word. Now and then, regularly as the slow swing of a giant pendulum, a puff of smoke lifted above the bushy head and vanished, and was repeated. That was all. No observer on the face of earth could have mistaken the relentless finality of that inaction, its absolute disregard of dénouement. It was a bluff, to be sure, but a bluff of the elements with life itself the stake. But for that flaming red canister on the table and the tiny dot of fire eating toward it inch by inch, it would have been histrionic. As it was it froze the blood—and made it boil.

Almost involuntarily Barry lit his own cigar and puffed at it like an engine. From Watson his eyes went to Morley Butler, and even at the distance he sat he saw the drops of perspiration gathering thick upon the other's muddy forehead; moved on to Tracy and stopped—stopped with a suddenness which spoke surprise, lingered with an expression akin to pity.

Of all the applied phrases generations of the sons of men have coined, one at least will live while human nature maintains. Of but two words, it embodies the physical opprobrium, the scalding moral taunt of psychic man. In its fine torture it is unique, and as the big man's eyes halted wonderingly it alone suggested itself, seemed adequate to the occasion.

Bluffer of his fellow men, posing cynic of all things sacred, indiscriminate scatterer of challenges, Norman Tracy had at last met the inevitable dénouement; met it and not met it, and therein lay the tragedy, the fine irony, the heartbreaking confession; for as surely as darkness follows light the nerve of the man was weakening under the test, his habitual effrontery collapsing like a cardboard box under a relentless hand. Against his will, his fiercest mental effort, the last frantic appeal of his self-respect, he was undergoing the unspeakable submission of body and mind absolute, the torture which flaunts the throes of death. He was admitting to himself and to the world physical cowardice. He was *taking water!*

Instinctively Barry, the spectator, turned away, but something, a force stronger than curiosity, compelled him to look back; and from that moment to the end he forgot long Watson, forgot perspiring Butler, forgot even himself. Many plays of human passion he had seen, many actors the world lauds great, but such a play with such an actor as Norman Tracy at that time, never. From the moment when Watson had struck flame to the cord fuse five minutes had passed, and true to his estimate it had burned halfway up, had all but reached the surface of the table. Deathly silent as the room itself, insidious but inevitable as the approach of age, it advanced, and with his red face and redder lashless eyes, Tracy's glance vibrated between it and the impassive man who had given it

birth. Conscious that he was being watched, he had at first attempted to appear unconcerned; but the farce had been too apparent even to himself and he had soon desisted. He still held the cigar Watson had given him, but it was unlighted and chewed ragged a third of its length. As at first, his hands yet remained on the chair back, but the fingers were gripped until the nails showed like rows of white dots. Save for his eyes and the muscles of his face and the throbbing arteries of his throat, he was absolutely still; but they were enough, more than enough, to tell the tale of the battle raging in his brain. Long before, the first kindly period of dreamlike unreality had passed. Plain as handwriting two passions struggled for mastery now; a blind, unreasoning love of life at any cost, a deadly white hot hate for the man who had arbitrarily made that price the most humiliating admission known to man. At first the contest seemed equal, but gradually as the seconds dragged into minutes, as the fuse shortened from a foot to inches, the predominance of the one over the other became distinctly apparent. One by one the white dots of the finger nails grew indistinct, merged into red. The tightened muscles of the jaws relaxed, the straight, closed lips parted to be moistened. For the first time the eyes wandered to the door and returned. The end was at hand.

Meanwhile, never looking around, still passively smoking, Watson stretched indolently in his chair. Had he once glanced up, showed a single emotion, it

would have relieved the tension. As it was, the silence and the inaction were unearthly. At last even Barry's cigar had gone out and of a sudden beyond every other impression he was conscious of the pulsations of his own arteries ringing in his ears. His eyes were glued to the tiny speck of flame with an uncontrollable fascination. It was halfway up the side of the can now, glowing against the red background like a demon eye. Against his will, disconnected, long forgotten recollections of his childhood, of maturity, went hurtling through his mind. Experiences——

Interrupting, explosive in its suddenness, startling as a voice from the grave, the chair beneath Tracy's hand went careening to the floor. A curse, involuntary, unintelligible, spat like a bullet through the silence. The rush of a man blindly running and a second later of another equally frantic following sounded through the room. There was an instant's halt, a clatter of falling glass, and Barry was conscious that he and that impassive, lounging figure were alone. A moment longer he sat motionless, adjusting himself mentally to the new condition, from the realms of fantasy returning to the dominion of reality; then, almost fearing to look, his eye caught the dot of fire and the fuse above. There was still an inch unconsumed, and with a sudden reactory rush of blood which tingled to the very roots of his hair, he arose steadily, and between thumb and finger pinched the blaze dead. Involuntarily he drew a long breath,

until the last cells of his lungs were stretched to bursting. Equally involuntarily he smiled.

A moment he stood so, then the smile vanished, and going back he shifted his seat until he looked the other man fair in the face. A complex exaltation which he made no effort to analyse dominated him, compelled relief in speech.

"Bruce Watson," he said, and admiration primitive, spontaneous, rang unrepressed in his voice, "Bruce Watson, I like you."

Chapter VII

A GLIMPSE OF THE PROBLEM

FOR so long that Barry coloured and fidgeted in his seat, Watson made no response; then returning from an aimless inspection of the room the big man found the wide-set blue eyes observing him steadily, analytically. Involuntarily he flushed more than before at memory of the utter boyishness of the outbreak; but Watson only smiled.

"Pardon me," he apologised, "if I was rude, but you took me rather by surprise. I've had men tell me—almost everything; but that they liked me"—again the smile—"the admission was unique."

"And therefore you doubted the statement?"

"No, I repeat, I was merely—curious to know what manner of man could feel that way."

Barry's round face broadened.

"No doubt you came to a speedy decision?"

Watson hesitated; then he rose and shook his damp clothes.

"I reserved verdict." He glanced from his stockinged feet to the big clock on the wall.

"Shall we adjourn? I hardly see how we can make any further addition to our record of imbecility to-night."

Barry too arose, but with distinct disinclination, and lit a fresh cigar.

"If you wish, go ahead. I for one, however, could no more go to sleep than I could walk a tight wire." He laughed shortly. "I've been restless as a fish all day, and this affair to-night, to say the least, hasn't helped matters. I think I'll stay and smoke awhile."

Watson paused.

"Do I gather that it would add to your happiness if I remained and kept you company?"

"Yes, frankly, it would. I'm of the modern type, gregarious, and just now the mood is particularly strong." Of a sudden he remembered. "But pardon me. You wish to get out of those wet clothes."

"It's entirely immaterial." Watson had returned to his former place. "Don't let that worry you in the least."

"But it does. For the instant I had forgotten. You'll catch your death of cold."

Watson smiled meditatively.

"I hardly think so. If I had a ten-dollar note for every time I've gone soaked all day and had my outfit dry on my back at the end I'd be wealthier than I am now. I'll smoke, however, if you please."

"Certainly. What, by the way, were you doing, sailing?"

"Hardly." Again the reminiscent smile. "The largest body of water I ever saw was Lake Michigan. Rain and sleet and snow, however, are equally wet when they soak in."

Barry wished to follow the lead, but something in

the other's manner warned him that the personal was at an end. He smoked a moment in silence and the interrupted mood returned.

"Do you know," he broke out at last, "I don't believe I'll ever understand the people of Sioux Falls. I've been here now several months, and I don't know a single person with whom to talk. If one wishes to drink or gamble, there are plenty; but for other than that"—his gesture was eloquent—"I'm positively hungry."

Watson made no comment.

"I think I shall have to take the conventional method and advertise my want," completed Barry with a laugh.

The doctor observed the half-inch of ash before his eye judiciously.

"Did it never occur to you that perhaps that was already the cause of your trouble, that you were too thoroughly advertised?"

Barry sobered.

"You mean——"

"In plain English that you don't have access to the people who are really worth while."

"In other words, they avoid me, my class?"

"Ignore would, I think, be a better word."

Involuntarily Barry coloured.

"I'll have to admit it has. I'm not blind." He flung one leg over the other explosively. "I'll admit further that I resent it. This thing of condemning without proof isn't even legal justice."

"But upon a personal admission——"

Barry straightened chillily.

"I don't think I understand."

"The principle is simple enough, I'm sure." The voice was as impersonal as a weather report. "Of necessity society at large accepts an individual's own testimony of self as truth, and the mere fact of a—transient's presence here is rather a fatal admission."

"I suppose I'm dense, but I still fail to understand."

"To be explicit, then, it admits first of all an elasticity of conscience concerning the obligation of an oath."

"You mean to imply——" Barry paused, stiffer than before.

"Nothing. I was merely stating a self-evident fact. Except for so small a proportion that they only prove the rule, the—transient element deliberately swear to an untruth in attaining residence."

"In plain Anglo-Saxon again," the big man was very white and the words came slowly, "you charge me with being a deliberate perjurer."

Watson blew a cloud of smoke impassively.

"I neither approve nor condemn. One cannot avoid observing."

For a moment Barry did not move, then with an effort he settled back into his seat.

"In speaking of admissions, you used the plural.

What other delinquencies, please, does our coming advertise?"

Watson ignored the satire.

"You really wish me to further catalogue the obvious?"

"Yes."

"Second, then, a transient's presence admits one of two things: moral cowardice or domestic fault."

"Once more I'll have to ask you to elaborate."

The lids over the wide-set eyes tightened just a shade.

"With pleasure. You'll agree with me that when one's conscience is clear no further vindication is necessary?"

Barry squirmed uncomfortably.

"Perhaps. For the sake of argument, yes."

"And that if innocent and sufficiently sinned against, relief can be secured at home?"

"All of which I presume is evidence of moral cowardice!"

"I repeat, I'm merely a disinterested observer, not a judge."

With an effort Barry composed himself once more.

"And as to—domestic fault?" The words did not come easily.

"A divorce presupposes a marital misunderstanding, doesn't it?"

"Assuredly."

"And to misunderstand implies two agents?"

"Yes."

The admissions were coming shorter and shorter, and the wrinkles about Watson's eyes tightened sympathetically.

"Did you ever, whether the occasion was a fist fight in the street or a nice bout with razor-edged tongues in a parlour, know an instance where one opponent was absolutely innocent, wholly without guile?"

"For the third time, to recapitulate, I'm either a moral coward or—have sinned in my home life?"

Watson said nothing.

"Answer me, please."

The long doctor, aroused, looked the other squarely in the eyes.

"If you insist on making a generalisation personal, yes."

For a half minute Barry returned the look.

"And this is why I've found the people here worth while—elusive, why you yourself persist in holding me at arm's length?"

Again Watson said nothing.

Once more Barry's cigar had gone dead and he lit it irritably. At the first puff, however, he flung the stub into the grate and, rising, strode back and forth across the floor with restless regularity. At last he stopped.

"Watson," he said recklessly, "between you and me I'm getting about to the end of my rope in the sort of life I'm leading here. I'm not used to doing nothing. It gives one too much time to think,

and thought is—fatal. I'm losing my self-respect daily."

The long listener puffed impassively.

"At first," rushed on the voice, "I thought it was merely physical rebellion I felt, and I rather envied the men I saw, they all seemed so self-sufficiently occupied. When later I found out, as you say, that these same people—ignored me, I became a trifle ironic. They seemed so wrapped up in their petty ambition of money-grubbing, so oblivious of the fact that real work is its own justification, so apathetic, apparently, to any sound save the ring of a dollar. Then one day, about a week ago it was, by chance I scratched a man I thought the dullest grubber of the herd, and all at once there popped out a scheme for making the little river under our noses here a ceaseless waterpower—by damming or something at its source—whose audacity fairly took my breath away. Then in a flash I saw light; but before I could draw him out he'd shut up again like a clam when a small boy pokes it with a stick, and I was out on the street adjusting my point of view to the revelation. That's when I really began to think, when I began to catch the perspective of your class for me, for my class. It's not been pleasant to consider."

Still Watson puffed on, and Barry observed him narrowly.

"I'll admit that you people are broad in your way, broad as the prairies I came through to get here; but you're narrow too. You can't differentiate an

individual from a class, can't see the exception. Most of all, can't recognise the extenuation."

Watson's blue eyes were fixed on the blank wall opposite, but a smile lingered in their depths. Barry caught the look and started walking again.

"I don't pretend that I'm arguing in the abstract, nor will I attempt to justify the motives of the majority who come here, but I do object to being classed with the herd, branded unclean without cause." He stopped belligerently. "Do you blame me?"

Watson flicked a bit of ash from his shirt sleeve leisurely.

"Certainly one resents disapproval without cause."

"You won't admit, though, that there's no case against me," quickly; "the possibility of an extenuation?"

"Once more I repeat, I'm not sitting in judgment."

"As purely an observer, then?"

One of Watson's long legs crossed over the other slowly.

"As an observer I see you here in the flesh. Being here the admission of one presence is difficult to distinguish from that of another. I see no logic which refutes the axiom that if a man swears to a falsehood he perjures himself; that a disagreement necessitates two agents." He arose and lit a fresh cigar impartially. "Purely as an observer I might add that the most fatal admission of all I ignored." He sat down again. "It's rather psychic than moral, anyway, and becomes an admission simply through prec-

edent. It's the real reason beneath the ostensible reason. The call of a new love drowning out the voice of the old."

For a half minute Barry said nothing, but his restless stride back and forth, back and forth, was eloquent.

"God, you're hard on me!" he voiced then; but there was no reply and he strode on. At last he flung himself into his old seat. "Moreover, you ignore an extenuation absolutely." It was almost a plea.

"A mere observer has nothing to do with extenuation."

"If you'd ever had a love or a tragedy in your own life," hotly, "you'd never say that. You couldn't. You'd justify—anything!"

The cigar left the doctor's lips and for a moment he was still as a figure in clay; then it returned and a ring of smoke lifted toward the ceiling. For another moment Barry too was silent, then a plump hand made an outward motion of abandon.

"Supposing," he said intensely, "that you had loved a woman with the best that was in you, had lived for her, slaved day and night to give her the things women demand, denied——"

"I beg your pardon," the wide-set eyes were of a sudden looking the speaker through and through, "but I'm not a confessor."

"No," quickly, "but you're a man. I shall not regret."

The blue eyes returned to the wall.

"Supposing, I say, that you had done these things, had divided your life absolutely between your work and your home; had never had a suspicion that anything was wrong, and then of a sudden had found out that for months you had been the merest dupe that—God! it pollutes one's mouth to say it—that you were a husband only in name! Wouldn't you say then that justified—anything?"

For a moment Watson did not answer and Barry waited, breathing hard.

"Pardon me," even yet the voice was impersonal, non-committal. "Pardon me if I answer a question with a question. Is there no avenue of relief, no scheme of justice, in your own State?"

"Certainly; but the added insult to injury of publicity, the dragging of your name and private life through the filth of the news column—— The thought even is intolerable!"

The doctor's bushy head shifted very slightly. Evidently the light hurt his eyes.

"You intimate that the divorce court was the only remedy. Did readjustment in private never suggest itself?"

For a moment Barry stared; then he laughed un-musically.

"You make the assurance more complete that your own life has been without a love or a tragedy," he satirised.

Puff, puff, went twin clouds of blue over Wat-

son's head. He had not smoked before for minutes.

"As an observer," he ignored, "I presume it is permissible to ask if Mrs. Barry knows you are here?"

The short, hard laugh was repeated.

"Most assuredly she does."

"And she approved of your coming?"

Of a sudden the big man's face sobered, tightened, whitened.

"No, no," he said. "No. I—I don't like to think of it."

"She was defiant, perhaps, shameless, heaped accusation on accusation?" The steady voice was relentless.

"No, God, no!" Barry's hand swept over his forehead. "She denied nothing, accused no one, admitted everything. That was the worst—admitted everything!"

"I see." A pause. "I see. There was not the slightest intimation of why you and she should have grown apart, why another should have crept into your place?"

"No explanation was possible," hotly. "I tell you I slaved like a dog to keep her in the fashion, in society. I was a poor, blind fool!"

Watson ignored the outburst.

"Mrs. Barry had always had a home interest, I suppose; children, perhaps?"

"No, thank God!"

"But you two were very much together; at meals, evenings, Sundays, holidays?"

"No," bitterly again. "I repeat, I had my work, my slavery for her royal amusement. I had little time for anything else."

"At least, though, the work itself was a mutual interest; was talked over together, dreamed over in common——?"

The voice became silent, the sentence incomplete. No need to carry further the suggestion now. At last the big man understood, understood only too well. All at once, like an army of ghosts, a swarm of hitherto meaningless recollections, scenes, episodes, flashed through his brain; in mocking derision jeered at his egotism, his blindness. Involuntarily again he passed his hand over his forehead. Drops of sweat had gathered thick and his collar choked him. He felt he could not be still and, rising, he swung back and forth like an automaton. Two minutes passed.

"Watson," it was a man to man plea, a manly plea, "you really believe that was the cause of her—doing as she has done, that she did not understand me or my motive, that she was lonely?"

The long listener was still turned away in silence.

"And," the speaker rushed on, "that there is a possibility of our getting together even yet, of forgetting the past!"

"I think," evenly, "she was lonesome, desperately alone."

"Yes, yes, I remember she said that now, the very

words, 'desperately alone'; but"—the floor echoed afresh under the big man's tread—"but that she should so forget herself, did not at least appeal first to me——" He sat down heavily and dropped his face into his hands. "No, I can't forget that. I never could forget it!"

In silence Watson arose and stood, his hands folded behind him, before the grate.

"Never?" he interrogated. "That's a long time, a very long time—when you love her."

Barry raised his face slowly, dazedly.

"I repeat, when you love her," said Watson quietly.

The big man drew in a long breath slowly. His shoulders squared, his eyes brightened. He stood up.

"Watson," he voiced intensely, "as man to man, could you in my place do what you suggest; would you?"

The long figure did not stir.

"No man knows what he would do under certain circumstances until they confront him. The question is worse than useless."

"But you have an intuition, a belief? You must have!"

"I believe if I were you I could and would—at least forgive."

The blood was dinning at the ears of Irving Barry. He clasped his hands to prevent doing fantastic things.

"And the other man, the one who with wide-open eyes——"

"Don't ask me that, please."

A bull in a china shop, Barry stumbled on.

"But I do ask you. It's vital!"

For the first time a trace of colour showed on Watson's thin cheeks, at his temples. Sympathetically the great arteries of his throat swelled, throbbed; throbbed almost to bursting.

"Strange to say, Mr. Barry," the voice was slow and steady, but its ice-cold relentlessness fairly froze itself into the listener's memory, "strange to say, I am human. I repeat I don't know what I would do; but I think, I think, if that other man ever showed me his face I would—strangle him. Yes, I think I would strangle him."

All about in an avalanche the china was crashing, and too late Barry realised what he had done. He stepped back, his stumbling tongue thickened.

"Watson," haltingly, contritely, "I beg your pardon—I never dreamed——"

As swiftly as had come the previous transformation the doctor was himself again, loose of joint, non-committal, impassive.

"Forget it, then," unemotionally. He put out the light and started for the door. "Come on, it's nearly morning."

Barry drew on his coat in the half-darkness of the hall. Of a sudden he stopped.

"You're forgetting your keys," he reminded.

The long figure leading the way likewise halted, looked back. From smoothness the angles of his eyes tightened, contracted into wrinkles, deepened, widened, spread until the lips parted in the most frankly amused, the most tolerantly sarcastic of smiles. He turned again down the hallway.

"You are labouring under a delusion, sir," he said. "I did not forget."

Chapter VIII

EULA FELKNER

"YES, sir;" the voice was unemotional as the clatter of small change on a pine counter. "Yes, sir, you were informed correctly. Won't you step inside, sir?"

Tracy paused for a last inspection of the exterior of the house. It was decidedly large, indifferently well kept, set well back from the street, pleasantly inconspicuous. Of pretentious design, its present weather-faded gentility marked it obviously as a structure with a past; suggested as the deep untterraced cut in the street before it, an ambition dead, unrealised, almost forgotten. Evidently the inspection was satisfactory, for the heavy, multipaned door closed behind him.

"This way, sir, and it's fortunate that you came to-day. I've just two rooms vacant, the best in the house—and those only since this morning." They had climbed the wide stairs and reached the hallway of the second floor. A maid with an abbreviated apron and a broom stepped obsequiously aside to let them pass, but did not look up. "The baggage, as you see, is still here, but will be taken to the noon 'Milwaukee.' The house," the first trace of modulation crept into the voice, "is in great demand, sir."

Tracy frowned slightly, but said nothing.

"You will pardon, please, the disorder." The landlady had thrown open a door at the extreme end of the hall and paused for the other to enter. "Packing is of necessity mussy, sir."

The man stepped inside and, as from the exterior, inspected the place swiftly, critically. There was a meaning pause.

"The other room connects also with the hall, as you doubtless noticed," the understanding was unemotionally perfect, "and with this by folding doors." She illustrated. "The furnishings I can rearrange at your suggestion."

The second room was partially darkened and, throwing up a shade, Tracy glanced out. As the woman had said, it was the most desirable suite in the house, facing the street, each room large, and together occupying the entire left wing. Again his inspection indicated approval, and he returned to the hallway and glanced keenly down its length.

"That room," he indicated the adjoining door, "is occupied, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"If I came here I should wish it vacated. I might not care to use it myself, but I would wish it vacant."

The woman showed no surprise.

"I think it could be arranged, sir."

Tracy turned to re-enter.

"I could secure board here, I presume?"

"Yes, sir, either at the common table or in private."

"I would wish it private."

"Yes, sir."

But one other consideration remained, and selecting a chair in the first room Tracy sat down, his beaver in his lap. Critically as he had inspected the house without and within, as impersonally, he looked the landlady herself from head to foot. A large-framed woman he saw, with a plenty, a superabundance of flesh. Broad hips and ample bust gave a suggestion of motherliness which her sharp grey eyes belied. Thin hair, but emphasising the obvious falsity of a switch beneath, told of middle age. A double chin did its best, but failed dismally, to soften the effect of a mouth which closed straight as a horizontal line. At that mouth Tracy paused satisfied. Gossip does not leak through an aperture such as that.

"I think the place will suit," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"So far as I see, the furnishings will be all right as they are. If I find otherwise I will suggest alteration later."

"Very well, sir," again.

Tracy hesitated a moment.

"My—sister, who is to occupy one of the rooms, I expect this morning. Could you arrange to have things ready by about noon?"

There was a pause but when, a shade suspiciously,

Tracy glanced up, the landlady was innocently tucking away a handkerchief.

"Pardon me," she excused, "these sudden changes are very bad for colds. As to the rooms, sir, I will put them in order at once. By an odd coincidence," obviously it was mere chance that the sharp grey eyes rested on the baggage in the hall, "it is a gentleman and his sister who are just leaving. The work will be easier on that account, sir."

Again Tracy frowned, more prodigiously than before. For some reason he was not so sure of that horizontal mouth line.

"I'm not in the least interested in the identity of my predecessors," he commented frostily. "What I wish is that the place shall fulfil certain requirements while I'm here. First of all"—the chin was in the air now, the eyelids half closed—"there must be perfect quiet in this wing. My sister is quite nervous, in fact, I'm bringing her here for a change of scene and climate, and must not be annoyed or disturbed. This is imperative."

"Quite right, sir." Like those of Tracy himself, the keen grey eyes were not so wide open as at first; but otherwise there was no change. "I will bear in mind constantly the lady's delicate nerves, sir."

Again the man's thin eyebrows met, but there seemed nothing tangible at which to take exception and he arose with dignity.

"Very well. I think we understand each other,

then." He was halfway to the door. "I trust you will not disappoint me."

"No, sir." The suggestion of clattering small change was again prominent, protrusive. "I shall be quite ready. The terms——"

"Any you wish to make." Tracy had paused impatiently. "I have ceased to expect something for nothing—especially in Sioux Falls." He moved on.

Only the woman's eyes followed him.

"It is my custom——"

Tracy wheeled angrily; but his hand was searching for his wallet.

"Gad," he emphasised, "you—sharks here wouldn't trust a Rothschild for a loaf of bread." He counted out five yellow-backed notes swiftly and extended them with a scowl. "Take that on account. The receipt you may leave in the room;" and without a backward glance he strode down the stairs.

Sioux Falls is the terminus of the Rock Island Railway, and as the long Chicago train pulled slowly into the station there was a sudden rush of activity which belied the size of the city. They were very late and with visions of broken engagements and belated lunches everyone was in a hurry. From his place at the rear before the exit of the single Pullman, Norman Tracy watched the steady outpour of humanity with an impatience his looks did not indicate. A small, black Havana, unlighted, was between his

teeth, and as at last the flow slackened he bit at it viciously and glanced ahead at the day coach with distinct perplexity. Was it probable—— He decided not, and his glance returned. As it did so, to the intense wonder and gratification of a small nearby loafer, the cigar was flung to the pavement and, an infrequent smile lighting his pitted face, the man stepped forward with almost boyish eagerness. A daintily tailored little woman in brown and furs had appeared in the vestibule and was glancing uncertainly, almost timidly, about the crowded platform. Her veil was lifted and the dark oval face looked tired and not a little irresolute. As Tracy, crowding the porter loftily aside, appeared, she glanced down and a smile of mingled relief and of pleasure flashed upon him like a sunburst from out a cloud.

“Oh, Norman,” she voiced gratefully, as their hands touched, “I was so afraid——”

“Never mind, little woman, never mind,” still smiling he read the look in the depths of the dark eyes, “I understand.” With quiet insistence he led the way to the other end of the platform; for with his silk hat he was a prominent figure, and more than one spectator was distinctly interested. “It’s all right. Our carriage is waiting.

“You look dead tired,” he continued solicitously as inside the cab they were rattling over the granite pavement, “and I’m going to be real stern with you. Not a word, even of gossip, will I permit until after lunch. Then”—of a sudden the sentence paused, and lean-

ing forward he took one of the daintily gloved hands between his own, "then"—a moisture crept into his eyes—"you don't know how I've wanted you, Eula; how lonely I've been without you!"

Instinctively sympathetic, real tears fountained into the girl's brown eyes. Her lip trembled.

"There, there," caressed the man quickly, "see what I've done; and when I was so happy, too! Not a word from you till after lunch; not a word. It'll only be a few minutes now. Your house is almost downtown. I think you'll like it." The hack stopped and, swinging open the door he sprang out exuberantly. "Here we are now, up the face of this mountain." He tossed a dollar to the waiting cabby and with an air of complete proprietorship took the girl's passive arm buoyantly and assisted her unnecessarily up the flight of steps to the level of the house.

The landlady in person answered his ring. Since the early morning she had curled her tiny knot of hair and apparently moulded herself fluid hot into a pale green waist. She extended a pair of latchkeys perfunctorily.

"I neglected to give them to you this morning, sir," she explained.

"Thanks," accepted Tracy. "Eula," loosing his companion's arm reluctantly, "this is Mrs. Waldow, your housekeeper and chief of staff." He looked over the girl's head meaningly. "You'll find her very ready to accommodate, I'm sure."

The landlady acknowledged the introduction with

the faintest of inclinations, but Eula Felkner extended her hand cordially.

"I do hope we'll like each other," she voiced confidently. "Everything will be so strange to me here at first."

For a second a look that was almost motherly softened Mrs. Waldow's hard face, but in the background Tracy was scowling like a thundercloud, and she remembered.

"Thank you, miss, I'm sure we will." She looked at the man levelly.

"Shall I serve lunch at once, sir?"

"Yes. Upstairs, at once."

Neither Tracy nor the girl made more than pretence of eating. Though he had not attempted breakfast, the stomach of the man was still a raging cauldron, and his head throbbed steadily. He almost expected the flood of ice water he drank to betray him by sizzling. Phelps, in whose company he had completed the previous night, could have explained the reason. Likewise the girl, though she made a brave showing by tasting everything, found an inexplicable tightness in her throat an unsurmountable barrier. Tracy had chatted industriously and she had listened and smiled dutifully, but she was very glad when the farce was over and the silent maid had cleared up the intimate little table. Alone at last, Tracy smilingly seated her in the easiest chair and drew up another close.

"Now you may talk," he granted. "I'm posi-

tively—famished to hear you. I wish to know everything about yourself, everything.”

But somehow the girl didn't feel like talking now, didn't know where to begin.

“It seems years since I've seen you.” Tracy had produced a box of cigarettes from his coat and was talking through a haze, “and you're such a poor letter-writer. I almost imagined sometimes you were forgetting me.”

“Why,” the girl stiffened defensively, “why, I always wrote you every other day and sometimes every day. I——”

“Yes, I know,” laughingly, “but they were such tiny letters. Five minutes and they were done—and I still hungry.”

A trace of colour came into the girl's brown cheeks; a colour the man noticed and in which he surreptitiously exulted.

“I know you were so lonesome,” she halted, “I understood that from your letters, and it seemed so hard you couldn't leave here even for a day. We women know so little of business and,” the colour deepened, “and I wanted you so, too!”

Tracy's chair slipped a bit closer and stopped. He took another cigarette from out the fantastically oriental box.

“I realise it was hard for you to understand, but I should have failed if I'd attempted to make the reason clear, so I didn't try.” He smiled tolerantly. “But let's forget it. You're here now, and I'm here.

To-day, our day, is come, to-morrow is waiting, and the day after, and the day after that." He was looking at her fixedly, almost hypnotically. "Let's forget it, I say. Let's be happy now."

The warm colour was still in the girl's cheeks, but her lips trembled involuntarily.

"You know I never doubted you; it wasn't that, but to leave the way I did," she swallowed and winked hard, "to have one's mother say what mine said, to——" The lump that all the time had been in her throat tightened preventingly, two great tears she could not repress started their journey down her cheeks, and she looked away. "I wish—I could forget," she halted. "I wish I could—but I can't!"

"Poor little girl!" Tracy's chair was very close now. "Poor little girl!" He patted the small brown hand passive on the chair arm protectingly. "I understand all, and shall not forget. Poor little girl!"

Minutes passed. On the sidewalk in front pedestrian after pedestrian pattered by, for it was a busy street. From somewhere in the rear of the rambling old house a maid sang softly at her work. There was the interrupting sound of an opening door, a few swift words, and the singing ceased, not to be resumed. Slowly, very slowly, the girl's trembling lips grew still. Her free hand, with a dainty bit of linen and lace kneaded in the palm, went to her eyes. She smiled, a trusting little smile.

"You're so good to me," she voiced, "and I'm so foolish. I'll try not to do it again."

Tracy busied himself with another cigarette. He didn't like to look at the girl then. Long ago, very long ago, in a previous existence, before he knew the world——

"You're tired," he justified. "It's a beastly distance from civilisation away out here; and everything is very new. To-morrow you'll feel different. I wanted to suicide myself the first day I was here and found out I'd have to stay, Heaven knows how long—and alone."

It was the girl's turn to comfort, and the lump was forgotten.

"Poor old Norman," she mocked. "Poor old man. Didn't have a friend anywhere." She laughed softly.

Tracy was a good actor. A real moisture came to his eyes.

"I did think so then, almost, when I wired you—and you didn't come and I wired again—and still you didn't come." He brushed his hand over his face. "I think I was jealous—I never was before. I thought after all maybe the other man——" Beneath his masquerade he was observing her keenly. "You know you would never tell me anything about him, even his name. I fancied——" He stopped and the cigarette in his fingers glowed fiercely.

The girl's eyes sparkled, her cheeks flushed.

"You know why I didn't tell you then, why I never would tell you."

"But I don't." The smouldering stump burned the man's fingers and again his hand went to the gaudy box. "I couldn't understand then and I can't now. Seems as though just to prove it was all past, all dead, you wouldn't be afraid——"

Eula Felkner looked at him reproachfully; but her cheeks still burned.

"It wasn't of myself I was afraid, it was of you and—him. You men are so unreasonable, so—primitive."

Tracy coughed suddenly. Evidently he had breathed a bit of smoke.

"But after four months," he persisted, "certainly by this time——"

"You really wish me to tell you?" It was a tid-bit dangled just out of reach.

"I wish you to do just as you please." The sudden coldness was not acting now. "I shall not ask you again."

The girl's hands met in her lap, clasped. The red left her cheeks, the sparkle her eyes.

"I can't tell you even yet." The fingers gripped tighter and tighter. "There's a reason, a good reason, but I can't tell you that either. I'm afraid."

Tracy was scrutinising her steadily. There was a deep line between his thin eyebrows.

"You have seen him since I saw you," he challenged suddenly.

"Yes. I—couldn't help it. He came clear to Chicago on purpose."

"He came—from where?"

Eula Felkner, her eyes very wide, returned his look bravely.

"Don't ask me, please, for I can't tell you. Please don't ask me."

Tracy lit still another cigarette from the stump of the last and smoked it half up in silence. Not for an instant did the furrow leave his forehead nor his eyes her eyes. From experience he knew he could dominate, and the temptation was irresistible. Very quickly the girl drooped. Her face fell into her hands spasmodically.

"Don't look at me that way," she pleaded desperately, "don't! You can't doubt me after what I've done, since I've come. I was so young when I met him; it was four years ago; but it's all past now, all dead since I've known you. I'll tell you sometime, anything, everything; but now, while we're here, forgive me, but I can't. I can't!"

Tracy arose heavily, elaborately, and walking over to a window stood with his back to her, listening intently. As well as though facing a mirror he knew what was taking place behind him. The quick catch of the breath showed that she had understood his action; thought she did. A longer silence passed, while she accumulated courage to look up. A faint little

sniff following was the accompaniment to which her tears were dried. At last came the expected.

"Norman——"

He did not stir.

"Norman Tracy," repeated a bit louder.

Still the man listened.

A chair creaked very, very slightly, a footfall came hesitatingly across the room, a hand touched his shoulder.

"Norman," pleadingly, "please don't hurt me so. You're all I've got. I've given up everything, everything for you. Oh, and I thought I was to be so happy to-day. Oh! Oh!"

At last it was the moment, his moment, and the man turned. There was no chasm between the brows now, no coldness in the eyes. His face was warm, more than warm; flushed, exultant. Upon it, staring forth legibly, was something else, something which should have been a warning; but dainty brown Eula Felkner did not understand, could not understand, for she had never known the like. She only realised that she had been forgiven, that the human she had confidently accepted as her god was very near, that in measure as she had been unhappy a moment before she was happy now, that temporarily, conventional morality was a shadowy, paltry thing, that the arms of her god were of a sudden about her, shutting out memory of past, thought of future; that his voice was in her ears speaking her name, Eula, Eula Felkner, that his

kisses, burning, intoxicating, were damp upon her cheek, her throat, that it was now, now! glorious, oblivious now!

A century passed—or was it a second? An ancestral something, an instinct she never thought to analyse, was calling, calling compellingly. Then, reality, guardian angel, mocking fiend, returned. She drew back, her face flaming, her whole body trembling. She struggled to be free, was free.

“No, no,” she voiced without reason.

But similarly something, a thing he had many times analysed, was calling the man.

“Eula,” he cried, “Eula,” and came a step forward.

Again she drew back.

“No.” There was no mistaking the determination in the monosyllable.

Tracy paused. The scowl returned blacker than before. He spoke—almost; completely mentally, but physically he caught the words forming on his lips. He was a good gambler, and the present stake was big, magnificent. To speak, to act, now would be fatal, irremediable. The man himself, not the masquerader this time, went stalking back to the window.

Instinctively, vaguely even, the girl realised the different attitude. Her lip did not tremble this time, but her great eyes widened as under a mydriatic and her brown face grew almost pale. She followed him slowly.

"Norman," she voiced again.

And again there was no response.

"Norman," her hand was once more on his shoulder, her voice very steady. "Norman, when are we to be—married?"

Still the man's face was turned away.

"Norman," intensely, pleadingly, "don't play with me now, to-day. I'm serious. Tell me."

This time the man turned. He smiled, slowly, peculiarly.

"Afraid, doubting—already?" he satirised. "For shame!"

"No, no, it isn't that," the grip of the hand on the shoulder tightened unconsciously, "but I'm a girl and—and I wish to know."

"I see," the smile broadened. "You're not afraid, you're merely—scared."

"Norman!" A world of reproach was in the voice, the imminent prophesy of a deluge as well.

"Eula, po' lil' girl!" Again the man's arm was around her, but merely protectingly this time. "We're tired and—nervous now, both of us." He was thinking swiftly, was Norman Tracy. "I'm going to leave you for a while. Lie down and go to sleep. I'll be back for dinner." Once, twice he patted the little hand on his shoulder deliberately. "Au revoir," and snatching up hat and coat he was gone.

Chapter IX

ACQUAINTANCE

A MAID with a pert, retroussé nose and a diminutive frilled cap on her curly head opened the door.

"You are the doctor, is it not so?" she questioned with an eye on the black leather case under the visitor's arm. At a discreet distance down the corridor the long-legged bell-boy who had acted as guide was winking at her, and she paused to bestow on him a freezing stare. "Please to come in. I have been directed." She crossed the room airily and tapped on an inner door. "Madam, I think, is waiting."

"Come!" The voice just penetrated the oak panels.

The maid opened the door significantly.

"The doctor, ma'am," she announced, stared, her head to one side, at the back of the long man who entered, and closed the door gently behind him.

A woman in a warm red dressing sack and the daintiest of low-cut slippers was reclining, in profile, to the entrance, before the Ninth Street window. She did not turn about and the visitor paused.

"I am Bruce Watson," he said. "You wished to see me?"

"Yes." A perfectly manicured hand, very white

by contrast with the pile of loose black hair, adjusted a straggling lock unnecessarily and returned to her lap. "Yes, I sent for you."

The doctor laid hat and case on a convenient table and came toward the window. Midway he paused and stood looking at his patient peculiarly; then he came on and took a chair by her side.

"The boy gave no name. I hardly expected to find Mrs. Thurston the invalid," he commented conventionally. "Tell me the trouble, please."

The woman scarcely looked at him, but one hand made a vague little gesture of hopeless obscurity.

"I don't know," she said.

The doctor smiled tolerantly. He had seen similar helplessness before.

"We'll try to find out," he encouraged, and went through the formulas. No light came.

"Can't you give me a suggestion?" he requested, "something definite to work on?"

The woman hesitated. There was the rustle of silk as one slippered foot shifted position.

"I didn't sleep much last night," she halted. "My bed folds down in front of this window and I've grown accustomed to watching something without. It's been a sort of hypnotic to me and—and it wasn't in place last night."

Bruce Watson said nothing.

"Would it help you any if I—explained what I missed?"

"It might." The voice was very quiet.

In the pause there was again the rustle of silken petticoats and the dainty slippers reappeared.

"I'll tell you then." Of a sudden the black eyes, minus the languor, were fixed on the doctor's face, as they had paused a moment the previous night before the theatre. "It was a light on the sixth floor of the building opposite, a light and a man beside it who sat there reading or doing nothing but smoke every night previous since I've been here." The hand repeated the gesture of hopeless obscurity.

"I don't know the trouble."

The seconds flew while the doctor returned the look. In the silence the life murmur of the big hotel, mingled with the muffled canary-like chirping of the maid busy with her work in the room adjoining, crept stealthily into the place. The woman's black eyes returned to the window.

"We, prisoners, you know, get to noticing little things, expecting them. I couldn't—can't imagine what is the trouble."

The man arose slowly, with the unconscious stretch which like that of a wild thing was so instinctive, and buttoned his coat. The garment was very new, very obviously ready made. In fact, but a few hours previous it had reposed on the shelves of an Israelite merchant.

"Mrs. Thurston," from crown to slippers he observed the woman below him calmly, unemotionally, "as an under dog I thought myself acquainted with

all the nice little devices designed by the upper dogs to emphasise our subservient condition; but I find I was mistaken." Neither hurrying nor lingering, he moved toward his hat and case. "I thank you for the disclosure and—wish you a good-morning."

"Dr. Watson——"

The man opened the door and simultaneously the voice of the maid was silent.

"Dr. Watson!" a note of command was in the voice.

The door closed gently; but with the visitor without.

The woman turned, and for a second looked at the exit peculiarly; then, a half smile on her lips, she sprang to her feet and followed.

"Dr. Watson!" She had overtaken him in the corridor.

The man addressed paused.

"Isn't it considered impolite to ignore a lady's summons," she had come close and the black eyes were looking him fair, "to go when requested to stay?"

Again and equally directly Watson returned her look.

"We Westerners, you know, are proverbially impolite, Mrs. Thurston."

"But you must certainly have exceptions. All rules have."

"There are no exceptions to Westerners. That also is proverbial."

"Is there no possible way, then, to avoid the obstacle," the wrinkled brow suggested intense thought, "to gratify one's wish?"

The medicine case had slipped a bit in the hollow of the man's arm and he returned it to its place silently. In the opening of the partially closed door a pert retroussé nose and a pair of curious eyes appeared. The mistress caught the deflection and as suddenly the space was vacant.

"Dr. Watson," she digressed swiftly, "I beg your pardon if you insist, though I meant no harm. I really wish to talk with you. Will you return?"

Once more as when she had sat before the window Bruce Watson gave the woman inspection. As though judge at a live stock show he went through her points. From the full forehead with its heavy black crown his glance went to the tiny ears and the broad dome behind; to the wide-opened nostrils; to the strong round chin; in ensemble the face was very red by this time, but he did not pause;—to the full bust with the slender waist—slender by nature, not by art—separating it from the fuller hips. He was not personal or insolent; he was merely analytic. That she was handsome, undeniably, strikingly handsome, apparently he did not consider. He——

"I repeat my request." It was a bell-boy, the long-legged hop who had acted as messenger, who was curious this time and the woman spoke hurriedly. "Will you or will you not return?"

The inspection ceased. The blue eyes smiled understandingly.

"I am at your service, Mrs. Thurston."

"I suppose"—the speaker was back in her original seat, but not looking out of the window now. There had been a long silence—"I suppose you think I'm demented or worse; but I'm not—yet. Why, please, if a prisoner takes interest in a certain window and a certain light, just why should that interest be considered—reprehensible?"

"Why?" answered an echo.

"Why again should a question concerning that interest be deemed an insult?"

"Why indeed!" The echo was on full duty.

They were facing now, a smile in the wrinkles of the doctor's eyes, the lids of the woman just drooping.

"But you refused to answer my suggestion."

"Did I? I fail to recall——"

"You were silent and—offended, which was identical."

"Silence a refusal?" Bruce Watson was looking up at the window of his own office meditatively. "I hardly think so. Silence is like the ubiquitous 'they' of gossip, a very elusive factor."

"You don't decline to answer then, I gather?" The accompanying glance was very direct.

"I repeat, I am at your service," with a bow.

The lids drooped a bit more over the black eyes as the woman leaned back.

"Tell me then the meaning of that—escapade I saw under way last evening. What happened after you disappeared down the street?"

Watson was still looking up at his own quarters.

"Might I enquire the reason you ask?"

"Put it down, if you wish, to mere idle curiosity."

Apparently unconsciously the woman's left hand lifted and, the sleeve of the dressing sack falling back, revealed a soft white arm to the elbow. "I know all of those people who were with you."

"Know them?"

"Unfortunately, yes." She made a wry face. "Birds of a feather, modernised, stop at the Cataract."

"I regret, Mrs. Thurston," the wide-set blue eyes had returned, "that I can't grant your request."

"After all, then, my analysis of silence was not so incorrect?"

"No. You asked me concerning a certain light. It was absent because I was absent. The—escapade was an initiation, and as its raw material I am under obligation. It was a secret rite. I have it on authority."

The woman looked at him peculiarly, a bit sarcastically.

"I beg your pardon, Dr. Watson, for my—unfortunate remark concerning your friends."

"I hasten to assure you of forgiveness, Mrs. Thurston."

The blue eyes and the jet black met. It was the latter which capitulated.

"Again in mere curiosity why wasn't an account of the affair, at least what we all saw here on Ninth Street, in the papers?"

"Once more I regret my inability to answer. Perhaps Mr. Tracy, if approached——"

"You mean they, the papers, were bought up?"

"Such proceedings have been known in journalism. I have no personal knowledge."

There was a lull in which a look of something more than annoyance flashed over the woman's dark face. For one of the few times in her life she was finding a man baffling.

"Dr. Watson," of a sudden she was looking him fair, "why is it that you persist in standing me in a corner like a naughty little schoolgirl? We're both too old to fear the bug-a-boo convention. Why, if I meet someone with whom it seems possible I could get in touch, should I be prevented? I'm not a siren or—what the attitude of your best people"—she mouthed the last three words inimitably—"seems to brand me. I'm a human being and, I admit it, a very lonesome one. I think to-day I'm—desperate."

Watson's long arms folded across his chest.

"By an odd coincidence I heard a very similar confession only last night. It would break no confidence, I believe, if I gave the name, Mr. Barry."

"Thanks for the suggestion. I think"—a short

laugh interrupted—"I think I shall have to look Mr. Barry up."

"Boston and New York, Mrs. Thurston, are a bit separate."

"You mean to tell me," frank incredulity was in the voice, "that he's changed his mind, is going back—now?"

"He climbed six flights of stairs this morning before the elevator started, to tell me so."

"And you——"

"I helped him pack. My time, I regret to say, is not valuable."

"I think I understand." Almost unconsciously the sleeve was returned over the bare arm. "Yes, I know I understand. You are a good—friend, Dr. Watson."

The man said nothing.

For a half minute the woman eyed him steadily, tiny wrinkles furrowing her brow. Twin pictures of a man sitting, hour after hour, night after night, alone in a sixth-floor room, and of the same man racing fantastically through a public street between rows of jeering spectators, struggled for compromise in her brain. The furrows deepened.

"Pardon me," she protested, "if I'm—tiresome, Dr. Watson, but you're—inexplicable. You know what I mean."

"Yes, I think so," slowly. "We're all a bit illogical, Mrs. Thurston, in addition more or less Jekylls and Hydes. I'm no exception."

"Perhaps elementally," grudgingly, "but not in public. Fancy what your best people, your—'Nob Hill,' you call it—are commenting to-day!" She smiled ironically. "I fear you're lost, Dr. Watson."

Again the man said nothing.

"I'm almost jealous. As a centre of gossip I and my class will be totally eclipsed."

"I dare say." The voice was politely corroborative, wholly uninterested; the pause which followed very suggestive. His companion caught the implication and for the first time showed her hand.

"Dr. Watson," she attacked directly, "you haven't answered my question. Is it because you fear contagion, because you accept the verdict that of necessity a divorcee must be—bad, that you won't be friends?"

"Pardon me, but I haven't declined to be friends. As to the verdict, I was not conscious that one had been given."

"Not given! you're rather humorous. I look in the mirror sometimes for the scarlet letter, it seems so obvious it must be attached to me somewhere."

One of Watson's long legs crossed the other and he leaned back comfortably.

"Did you ever consider, Mrs. Thurston, how much weight the attitude of the people you quote bears to the mass of Sioux Falls?"

"Certainly you, a mere man, won't contradict the ultimatum of—society!"

The visitor ignored the sarcasm.

"How many people here do you suppose have ever given you a thought, much less a verdict?"

"Probably very few."

"Certainly very few." He caught her look. "I mean no disrespect, but the great mass, the people who count, who do things, who are worth while, are as absolutely unaware of your presence as though you were at home. The first sight, the initial contact with a town is of necessity misleading. Pour any liquids, and people are fluid, together, and the foam seeks the surface. We have the froth here, to be sure, and it first of all impresses the newcomer; but except itself, not one resident here takes its bubbling seriously. The real developers, and everyone of consequence in this new country is such, have no time to waste condoning or condemning a chance transient resident. Accept my word for it, the motive which brought you here is of no more importance to them than who is the latest favourite of the Sultan of Turkey. Don't waste satire on a dummy of straw."

"But granting all you say to be true—and you make one believe it is true—you can't deny that you yourself, with whom I've absolutely come in contact, are holding me away?"

"No," slowly, "I won't deny that."

"Tell me why then, please. A man who reads and smokes night after night alone can't be burdened with friends. Is it because you personally consider me bad, not worth while?"

"I don't know you, Mrs. Thurston. It's not that."

"The instinct of convention still lingers perhaps?"

"No," again.

The woman leaned forward intensely. Her dark face worked.

"What under Heaven is the explanation then? I'm human and lonesome, and you've shown me yourself how impossible it is to get into the lives of any of the people I'd like to meet. You interest me. Don't misunderstand, this isn't flattery. I've watched you. You've proven you can be a friend, a good one. Why shouldn't we repeat the experience if we wish?"

Very slowly Watson arose.

"I think if you'll consider the matter a moment you'll understand without my telling you."

"I have considered." A hopeless little gesture again bared the plump arm to the elbow. "Do you fancy it was on an instant's whim that I sent for you?"

"No, I suppose not." Unconsciously the speaker's hands disappeared in his pockets. "The reason, Mrs. Thurston, is this. A man and a woman of equal age cannot become vitally intimate and remain friends. They must either stop short of understanding, which is useless, or become more. The thing you suggest is impossible."

The woman too had risen now and stood facing him squarely.

"Do you mean to tell me, Bruce Watson, that you're afraid of becoming—more?"

There was no answer.

"Obviously not." The red lips curled slightly. "It is I who take the chance and I assure you I'm willing to accept the risk."

Still there was no answer and the woman came a step closer.

"One would think we were children afraid of the dark, or a pair of our ancestors, the apes, chattering in terror at sight of fire." The black eyes were burning ominously. "If you decline to be friends, say so flatly. Don't offer a schoolboy evasion such as you've given."

Even yet the man did not answer, but for the second time took up hat and case.

"I think it were better I went now," he said evenly.

For a moment the woman did not stir, only looked at him; then of a sudden the colour mounted her dark face like a flame.

"Certainly, if you wish. I'm not a jailer." A challenge, an ironic mockery spoke in the distended nostrils, throbbing in the repressed voice. "Rest assured I shall not follow you again."

Another moment the man hesitated; then of a sudden, hat in hand, he turned. In the space of that instant, short as it was, an alteration unbelievable had come over him, a change which sent the red scurrying from his companion's face.

"I repeat I think it were better I went now." He was actually smiling; that broad, wide-eyed, understanding smile of his. "By some chance I might

have a patient waiting. I shall be pleased, however, to return at any time you wish. I shall await your pleasure, Mrs. Thurston." A second longer he remained so, smiling down at her; then with a bow he was gone.

Chapter X

MASQUERADE

"COME in," grudged a surly voice.

"At last," Phelps interrupted his sentence with a distinct slam of the door behind him, "at last I've found you. Where in the name of all that's good and proper have you been all day? I've vibrated back and forth between here and the club until the elevator boy thinks I'm crazy."

Tracy continued his packing in unbroken silence.

"If you won't explain, at least give me a cigarette." The newcomer threw himself on the bed and propped his head up with the pillows. "I'll do the talking for two for a bit."

"What's the fresh trouble?" Tracy tossed over the box requested. "Wasn't to-day's letter warm enough to suit you?"

"It's you that's the matter," ignored Phelps with fine scorn. "You've done just what I said you would, smashed our club into a memory." He scratched a match vindictively. "I was over there for three hours this afternoon and save for the janitor not a soul showed up."

"Well——"

"Well!" The faded eyes blinked angrily. "Well, I've got two months to put in here yet somehow and now they'll seem two years."

"Got to put in, you say?" Tracy folded a pair of trousers carefully. "Do you know I was labouring under the impression that somehow, if the necessity was thrust upon them, the town here would manage to struggle along even if you were to go to-morrow."

Phelps glowered through the haze of smoke in silence.

"If I were you and dissatisfied," completed Tracy, "I'd cut it."

The visitor scowled more portentously than before, but apparently the other was totally oblivious. In consequence the choler of the boy-man augmented, passed the point of repression.

"Gad," he exploded at last, "you'd try the patience of a saint, Norman! A person would think you weren't in the same boat."

"I'm not." The coat and vest followed the trousers, and Tracy went in search of fresh material. "I like it here, so well, in fact, that I'm liable to stay for a year."

Phelps blew a clear line of vision.

"Don't attempt to be humorous, Norman," he advised spitefully. "It's not your forte, you know."

Tracy said nothing, and Phelps finished the cigarette in silence. Obviously the shot had told, and the marksman fairly gloated. Usually with Tracy he was at the other end of a sarcastic sentence.

"By the way," he helped himself afresh from the box, "how's your friend Watson to-day? I trust he didn't catch cold or anything last night?"

The labourer paused in his packing, a sheaf of freshly laundered collars strung over his arm.

"My boy," he said with meaning deliberation, "the time is coming—I trust—when you'll know more than you do now. To hell with Watson!"

Stephen Phelps puffed on in pure delight.

"Done with him, are you, Norman?" he goaded smilingly.

"Yes." The cuffs were transferred to the trunk and patted smooth with unnecessary nicety. "Yes, I'm done with him as completely as I am with you. I can't think of a more final comparison."

Phelps laughed outright. It was a delightful joke. In fancy he already heard himself telling it to Marsh.

"Going to isolate yourself completely in future, eh? May I inquire your address to be?"

"I see no reason why you shouldn't inquire—if you wish."

"Very well then, I do inquire."

"Or inquire a second time if it gives any satisfaction."

"All right," easily, "I ask you a second time."

"Or even a third."

Phelps sat up.

"What the deuce are you getting at, Norman? Do you mean you won't tell me?"

Tracy poked a roll of soiled linen into a vacant niche with his cane.

"I thought I was explicit enough originally. I will repeat, however, if you wish."

Phelps' boy face went very red.

"I'm to understand then," the voice was redolent of dignity, "that you were serious when you said you were going to—cut me?"

"You've grasped my meaning perfectly." The accompanying bow was sarcastically elaborate. "I congratulate you upon your marked development."

Involuntarily Phelps' hand went to the box for a cigarette. It was empty.

"Here's one unopened," proffered Tracy, tossing over a gaudy mate.

"Confound you, Norman," the visitor was on his feet, "I can't believe this of you. Are you merely guying me or not?"

Tracy straightened, a pitying smile upon his lips.

"Good Lord, man," he emphasised, "must I make affidavit and have a notary's seal attached before you'll believe me? Most emphatically I'm not masquerading. I'm done with you and Marsh and Barry and Butler—and all of you. Is that distinct enough?"

"Yes." Phelps was quiet now. "I understand you perfectly; but why? There must be a reason. We've been rather—at least useful to each other."

"You've said it—answered your own question. You have been useful and ceased to be so: the complete explanation in a sentence."

"Part of it, you mean," the oval chin with the dimple in the centre tightened doggedly, "the lesser part. I see no reason why one so frank as you should

avoid the real admission. I wish you joy of her— whoever she may be.”

“Good! Capital!” Tracy was smiling openly. “You’re developing possibilities of which I never dreamed you capable. By the time you—grow up you—may be—even bearable.”

“Tracy,” Phelps’ face was as white as his clinched fists, “damn you——”

“Tut, tut,” the other held up a reproving hand, “spare your expletives, my boy. They’re very useful on adequate occasion; too useful to waste. I don’t wish to wrangle with you.” He smiled condescendingly. “You’re not worth while. Just because you see fit to be jealous, because I happen to have the nerve to go after what I want while you sit down to gnaw at your paws and wait, like a starved puppy—do you fancy I’m going to quarrel over that?”

“No,” it was Phelps’ turn to smile, “I don’t imagine you’d quarrel—really, with anyone, you—bully. You’d nag them and insult them—if they permitted you, as I have—I acknowledge it; but if they showed fight——” Of a sudden the smile left his lips, the pink fingers clinched afresh. “You brag of nerve, you, after last night. God, man, where’s your memory!”

Tracy stiffened. The dapper little cane still in his hand indicated the door.

“You may go now,” he said.

“Nerve,” Phelps ignored the gesture, “you call it nerve to bring a girl young enough almost to be

your daughter out here on a lie—oh, I understood you all right, though you thought I was too drunk—nerve to——”

Interrupting, Tracy strode across the room and with his own hand flung open the door. “Out of here, I say,” he voiced, “quick!”

“Oh, I’ll go, never fear.” Phelps took up his hat almost jauntily. For the moment he held the whip hand and the knowledge intoxicated him. “I’ll go, but”—he paused face to face with the other man menacingly—“but don’t fancy I’ll forget you. We’ll be here in this town together several days yet, and you’ve told me at different times a good many things. You’ll regret this afternoon, Norman Tracy.”

The door slammed with a crash and, simultaneously stepping forward, Tracy’s freckled hand closed on the other’s shoulder with a grip like a trap.

“I told you a while ago,” he recalled swiftly, “that I wouldn’t quarrel with you, and I won’t. I repeat, you’re not worth while. I won’t even make you take back what you just said.” The fingers tightened anew until involuntarily Phelps winced. “Even that isn’t worth while. Eula Felkner, I’m conscious I mentioned her name, wouldn’t believe a word you spoke on oath; while one sentence, a single telegram and—I don’t need to elaborate. These are degrees even of cowards, and you——” He was leading the way toward the exit, Phelps following passively. “I know what you would do if you dared, and I’m letting you off easy; but don’t ever show your face to

me again. I may not be in as good a mood next time. When you see me coming take the other side of the street. Remember that." The grip loosened with a suddenness which sent the other staggering. "Now go!"

.

"Eula," Tracy smiled indulgently, almost condescendingly, "you're as transparent as plate glass. What is it?"

Again they had gone through the semblance of a meal, the tiny table had been removed and they were alone.

For answer the girl shivered slightly and moved nearer a radiator in the corner. Tracy, who observed many things, noticed it was darker there.

"Cold, are you?" he queried sympathetically. He was in excellent humour as he always was when in an encounter he had spoken the last word. "Let me bring you a wrap."

"No, thank you. I'm all right now."

"Lonesome then, eh?" The man shifted his own chair so he could face her in her new position. "Something's wrong, that's certain."

"No," again, "I think not—yet."

"Not—yet!" laughingly. "Sufficient unto the day—you know the rest. Just remember, girlie, that it is to be the one object of my life to prevent—yet ever coming. Don't you believe me?"

"I—believe you think it is," haltingly.

Tracy laughed again.

"If anyone else had said that I think I should have been—ferocious; yes, I know I should have been."

He paused and his look became serious, intimate.

"What, then, is the trouble, Eula? I have the right to ask. I wish to help you. Tell me."

"You wish to help me, make me happy, really?" The query was very slow, very direct.

"Yes, girlie."

"Why, then," the girl was not shivering now, but sitting very straight, very still, "why then are your trunks out in the hall?"

In spite of himself the man's eyes dropped. He had expected anything but this; and in silence he cursed himself mentally not to have thought of it, to be thus taken by surprise. His face reddened like that of a guilty schoolboy.

"Tell me why, please," repeated the girl steadily.

"Eula!" Tracy had found his tongue at last, "Eula."

"Don't—now, please." The interrupting voice was unnaturally peremptory, unnaturally even. "Tell me."

Again Tracy hesitated. Again he remembered the stake and his gambling instinct arose.

"I'm sorry you have no more confidence in me than your—intimation shows," he said coldly. "It means that I fancied so long as you knew no one else within five hundred miles you'd like to have me near, and that in consequence I rented the room next door for myself. I thought you wouldn't feel so much

alone so. That you would misunderstand——” He turned away suddenly. “You hurt me, Eula. You don’t know how much you hurt me!”

Just perceptibly the dainty little brown figure in the corner relaxed. Her eyes wandered to the big folding doors connecting with the adjoining room, to the broad shoulders of the man her companion. The back of him trembled a bit as she looked.

“Norman Tracy,” she voiced gently, “forgive me for asking you again, for what it seems to mean, but as you love me, is that the whole—truth? I’d find out some time anyway, but I want to know now, now!”

“Eula!” It was a plea, a reproach, a cry of pain. “Eula.”

“But answer me,” passionately. “I must hear you say it.”

Tracy turned about, almost majestic in his injury.

“On my word of honour, then, yes.” He paused and deliberately played his last trump. “If you wish, I’ll not unpack. I’ll move back to the hotel yet tonight.”

There was a pause, a long pause, and at the end a happy little intake of breath.

“Norman,” there was no repression, no suspicion in the soft little figure now, “forgive me. Forget that I asked you, I—I couldn’t help it. I’m so tiny and you’re so big and strong, and my mother said so many, many things trying to keep me from coming.

I—oh, please don't look at me like that. I don't doubt you—really. I just have to hear you tell me—everything. I expect so much of you, so fearfully much; I—I love you so.”

As once before Norman Tracy looked away. The memory of that long ago, the time he had thought safely buried in oblivion, was tapping afresh at his consciousness. He frowned—to prevent doing something else.

“I repeat, I can still return if you wish, if there yet lingers——” He paused meaningly.

“Norman!” reproachfully.

“All right.” In pretended misunderstanding the man arose brusquely. “I'll call a cab.”

But the girl was before him and sat down on his coat gleefully.

“Norman Tracy, you're a regular—bear.” She looked at him commandingly. “You sit down again this minute.”

“Sit down, sir,” she repeated as he hesitated, and he took his seat.

“Now,” she arose and smoothed the rumpled top coat daintily, “tell me all about yourself, what you're doing here.” She returned to her former place smilingly. “It's my turn to ask questions to-night.

“You may smoke if you wish to,” she granted as he hesitated. “I don't mind tobacco a bit.”

Tracy produced the blackest of black Havanas.

“Thank you,” he said enigmatically. “What would you like to know first?”

"Just what I asked you, please. The thing that's keeping you here."

"That? Oh, the mere telling is easy enough." He had expected this question and was prepared. "Like everything else, in bare outline, the deal I have in course of development is simple as child's play. It's the details beneath the surface that whiten one's hair."

The suggestion was portentous, so ominous that Eula Felkner feared to break it with even a comment. For a moment Tracy watched her shrewdly, ambiguously; then of a sudden he leaned forward and his voice lowered confidentially.

"The town here, Sioux Falls, is like a big awkward schoolboy who has grown to be a man without consciousness of the fact. Again, like ancient Rome, it's scattered over the seven hills and through the valleys between. It's in crying need of a street-car system; but like the boy it doesn't realise its own size, its own possibilities. That's what I'm banking on. What keeps me awake nights is fear that it will wake up before I'm ready for it to do so. I intend to give them the line all right, but I wish them to think it a favour and make it worth my while. Do you see?"

"Yes, I—think so." The brown face was very serious, very thoughtful. "You wish to get what they call in the papers a—corner?"

"Exactly." The enigmatic smile reappeared at the answering flush of pleasure. "That's the idea

exactly. If they thought for a second I was really anxious for the franchise, if I seemed in the least hurry, appeared the smallest bit elated at the prospect, they'd immediately be suspicious and either hold the thing up entirely or insist on making terms that would be impossible. All that I can do is to lie low and play a waiting game; get them impatient enough to come to me."

The girl nodded her head sagely.

"I'm sure I understand now," she averred. "That's why you couldn't leave even for a few days to come to Chicago." She was fairly bubbling with the conception of the game. "You were afraid some other man with brains would come in and see the opportunity you saw—would get in ahead of you while you were gone!"

Tracy nodded gravely and Eula Felkner admired him with sparkling eyes.

"You're—wonderful, Norman," she appreciated, "wonderful!"

"Thank you." Tracy blew a cloud of smoke with the impassivity a great man always exhibits toward mere material considerations however large. "I think you will understand now, Eula, why I couldn't answer your question of our marriage this afternoon." Inspiration told him this was his opportunity and he grasped it by both horns. "I can't let them think I'm in any way liable to stay here, that I have any other interest. They'd fancy they could delay—and delay would be fatal. I wish them to imagine that

if they don't hurry I'm liable to get tired at any time and leave them, take away their only hope. I've got to keep them entirely in the dark."

For an instant there was a pause and Tracy expected—anything. Egotist as the man was he could hardly believe anyone, even Eula Felkner, would accept such preposterous logic; but there was no outburst and confidence returned.

"You see for us to marry now would be impossible. I think—I hope they'll act soon. God knows how badly I wish them to, how I want you, you, Eula!"

"Do you really want me so much, Norman?" queried a tense little voice.

"Eula!" The man was very rigid, very repressed; the fixity with which he inspected the floor at his feet most eloquent.

"So badly that you'd give up the franchise now, would take me instead if I asked it?"

A seeming convulsion shook the broad shoulders.

"I'd never thought you would ask it, Eula."

"But if I did?" insistently.

"I'd—give it up. Yes, I'd give it up, girly!"

Complete as was the conquest, the temptation was too strong not to carry it a bit further.

"You're sure you wouldn't regret it after—we became staid married folks, Norman?"

"Yes, I'm very sure I wouldn't regret, Eula. Whatever I'd lost I'd have—you."

"Oh! Oh!" it was the pæan of a conqueror,

something subtler, the unsuspecting love-note of a maid, "and to think I could ever have doubted you! Oh! I'm so happy, so happy, so happy!"

In infinite wisdom Tracy held his peace. The rug at his feet was an oriental blending of red and yellow and green. He remembered that pattern as long as he lived.

"You"—the present, the glad, glad present had returned—"you are ready to do as I ask about our marriage, whenever I ask?"

"Yes, girlye." No voice could have been more abject.

"To-morrow if I wish?"

"Yes," again.

The girl could not be still. She wished to dance, to sing. She arose, her hands linked tightly behind her.

"Well," she paused in giddy expectation of the consternation her decision would bring, "well, we'll wait."

"Eula," at last the man looked up, his face all surprise and relief.

"Yes," she wished to laugh aloud at the glad, glad trick she'd played upon him. "Yes, we'll wait for the franchise and then, then——" Her face flamed at the suggestion.

"Girlye," the man arose impulsively, "how can I ever repay you?" He started forward, his hands outstretched.

"No, no, not—now." The girl caught his look.

and retreated unconsciously. "You're so unselfish. You deserved it. I—understand."

"But"—the other paused—"but you'll let me—thank you?"

The brown head shook a negative.

"No, not that way, to-night. It's so perfect as it is. Anything—more would be a desecration. Leave me alone now, please. I wish to think about it."

"Eula! Girlie!" The passion was not histrionic this time.

But the shaking head, though very joyous, was very emphatic.

"No, Norman, not to-night. Go and unpack, please." She looked at him with a world of love and confidence in her brown eyes. "Good-night, dear."

For five dragging seconds Tracy stood as he was; then with a tightening of every muscle in his body he remembered the stake. Slowly he turned. More slowly, awaiting at every step a recall, he made his way to the door; opened it reluctantly, closed it with a suppressed oath. A second later he caught the patter of soft little steps following and waited expectant. Listening he heard a key turn softly behind him.

Chapter XI

UNDERSTANDING

THE place was imperfectly lighted by a half score of candles, and as Watson, again under the surveillance of the airy French maid, entered the well-remembered inner room, he at first thought himself alone; then from a partially shaded angle a woman arose.

"Dr. Watson,"—she was coming toward him and he felt rather than saw the fine harmony of the perfect-fitting black gown, the contrast of red here and there and the dazzling white of arms and shoulders,—“I am so glad you came. I”—she took his hand frankly and with a friendly little smile—“I was afraid after all that at the last moment you’d fail.

“Be as lazy and comfortable as you please.” The man had voiced the amenities and from her own seat Mrs. Thurston indicated the big Turkish rocker near, premeditatedly near, at hand. “At heart you men are all alike. After dark you’d rather lounge and smoke than do anything else on earth.”

“Thank you.” Watson settled himself luxuriously, his long clean-shaven face with its mass of light-brown hair above standing out distinct against the high black padding. “Apparently you’ve given my sex careful study.”

His companion smiled tolerantly.

"Certainly. All women do. The only difference is that some will admit the fact while others won't. A subject who failed to at least make an effort to understand his rulers would be very unwise, don't you think?"

The doctor's blue eyes lifted whimsically.

"I trust you realise the tremendous admission of that last sentence, Mrs. Thurston?"

"I most emphatically do," easily. "We're living to-day, not a hundred years from now and, subterfuge aside, for the present at least man is King."

"With powerful influences behind the throne."

"Yes. That's where the study of royal frailties is of value. Those cigars on the table are for other than decorative purposes, doctor."

Watson laughed outright, a laugh to match the frankness of the wide-set eyes.

"Thank you again." He helped himself deliberately. "You at least have apprehended my present wish with a certainty bordering the uncanny. I haven't touched tobacco for a day."

"The case you suggested as possible must have materialised, I judge?"

"It did—forty-eight hours late was all." He clipped off the head of the cigar with his penknife. "The family is so poor that not another doctor in town could be induced to approach them."

"And with you, I gather," the voice was enigmatical, "remuneration is of slight consideration?"

"Paradoxical as it may seem, yes. I manage nevertheless to live."

The black eyes with the mockery in their depths settled farther back into the shadow.

"Dr. Watson, if I ask you a personal question will you answer it or—stand me in the corner? If the latter I shall refrain. The experience is unpleasant."

"I have partaken of your hospitality and your Havana leaf, Mrs. Thurston."

"Very well then." The white arms made an inverted V as they crossed behind the speaker's head. "What in the name of common sense are you thinking of when you remain vegetating in a little place like this?"

"A little place, Mrs. Thurston?" smilingly. "You should have seen the town I started in. It had one solitary building which was implement warehouse, and hardware shop, and post office, and dry goods emporium, and grocery, and drug store—where they kept everything from toilet cases to kerosene oil for the farmers' lamps—all combined. My office was there also."

"And yet you left?"

"Yes."

"And came here?"

"I came here."

His companion eyed him meaningly.

"You must have had a good reason for the change?"

"I thought I had—when I moved." The wrinkles had gone now.

"You wouldn't mind telling me the incentive?"

"No." But he said no more.

"Or perhaps I might guess."

"If you wish."

The white V changed to normal as the clasped hands returned to the questioner's lap.

"A—woman couldn't well live there?"

"You'd make a good detective, Mrs. Thurston. No, a woman couldn't live there at all."

Of a sudden the dark face appeared from out the shadow.

"Any more than a woman could live in a tiny room at the top floor of a six-story office building?"

"The cases are parallel."

"And still you're living there?"

"Yes. At least for the present that's where I spend most of my time."

Again there was a meaning inspection.

"You expect to move—up, to a larger city again?"

"No. I shall never practice medicine in another city."

"You fancy your practice will develop—sufficiently here?"

"I was positive so—when I came."

"And now?"

"I never expect to do more than at the present."

The dark eyebrows lifted.

"You consider that you have—arrived?"

"Nothing is farther from my thought, Mrs. Thurston."

Almost impatiently his companion returned to the partial obscurity of the corner.

"You are not keeping your word, doctor." The tone was a reproach, the implication a challenge.

"I repeat your Havana leaf is excellent. The fault, if fault there be, is unintentional."

There was a belligerent pause and again it was the woman who capitulated.

"Technically," she admitted, "I suppose you're right. You've answered every question; but the real why you haven't explained."

"Why?"

"Yes, why you're living as you are. Why you have no ambition to be more?"

"You didn't ask me that, Mrs. Thurston." Watson blew a cloud of smoke and watched it lift to the ceiling impassively.

"Very well then, point blank, why is it?"

"Equally directly," he tapped a bit of ash free on the tray, "the incentive which brought me here, which would have made me a success in my line, has departed."

"In other words the woman is gone."

"Yes." For all the emotion in the voice it might have been an acknowledgment of the announcement that dinner was served. "Yes, the woman is gone, Mrs. Thurston."

"And the work itself is insufficient?"

"No, I can't admit that; but it's not my work. It was a means to an end and the necessity has ceased to exist. It is all very prosaic."

The figure opposite changed position.

"You are very young, Dr. Watson."

The man said nothing.

"And humorous."

Still the other held his peace.

"To fancy in this day and generation that the necessity would never recur! Pardon me. I can't help it." There was a soft little repressed sound and the handkerchief disappeared from the lap.

Slowly a half inch of ash burned on the doctor's cigar and again the brass holder rang softly as he tapped it free. The black eyes concealed in the shadow were watching him intensely, fixedly, in a way they had never watched a human being before. Long previous, so long that she had forgotten the circumstance, the woman's mood of tolerant amusement had passed.

"You seem very sure of the future, doctor, of yourself."

"I am; absolutely certain."

"Precedent," mockingly; "the example of others seems to be sadly against you."

"I am not speaking prophecy of others, Mrs. Thurston." One of the big hands spread palm upward on the padded arm. "I neither am nor care to be my brother's keeper."

"Perhaps not, yet nevertheless you condemn him if he deviates from your standard."

"I repeat, if I have offended it was unintentional."

"You mean to say," the rapid voice fairly permeated scepticism, "that you could live side by side, day after day, year after year, with an individual who flaunted your every ideal of propriety and not denounce such a person?"

"So long as the ideals of me and mine were undisturbed, yes."

"And if they were?"

"I am human. There would be a reckoning."

The woman came wholly into the light, remained there.

"Dr. Watson," she challenged, "you're more than merely young. You're a child."

Answering the faintest suggestion of a smile sprang into the wide blue eyes; but that was all.

"You mean to say that you could accept another person, me, for instance, on trust, without knowledge of a single past incident in my life, entirely ignorant of the possible defection which might have brought me here, without assurance that I had not committed the supreme sin of woman, could accept me as a friend——"

"Your pardon, I explained——"

"As an acquaintance, then," grudgingly, "and not even ask me to justify myself, swear that I was——innocent?"

"Yes. Morals are *the* essentially individual things." He emphasised the article.

"And you would not then or ever after be even curious?"

"Is it so wonderful?" The smile was positive now.

"Wonderful!" The great arteries throbbed visibly in the brown throat. "It's unbelievable. You're a dreamer!"

Her companion only eyed her smilingly.

"To satisfy my curiosity," swiftly, "I'd like to know the philosophy of life of a person who believes he believes such things."

"It's very simple, Mrs. Thurston. I can put it in a sentence. Do not make yourself obnoxious to others."

"Is that all!" The red lips tilted visibly. "You'd ignore love, and happiness—the things every human being has sought for since the day of Adam and Eve?"

"No, assuredly I'd not ignore them; but I wouldn't be a rainbow hunter and search deliberately for something which never comes consciously. I'd do something and do it so hard that I'd forget myself, and in the eternal fitness of things both would come; or if they did not I'd never notice the lack."

"You say this," defiance was in the eyes, mockery in the voice. "You who have just admitted you were doing nothing?"

"It shall not be so always, Mrs. Thurston."

For a moment the woman looked at him dumbly, as though she saw an element.

"Are you merely yourself," she queried slowly, "or are you the normal here, the Western type?"

Involuntarily the long figure straightened. The great bushy head tilted back. The broad chest widened.

"I, Mrs. Thurston?" He looked away. "I am not a type of anything. I'm merely the faintest reflection of something every man who has spent most of his life on the prairies understands, something which if you will go out some night alone, a hundred miles from another human being, under the stars, with the silence infinite all about you, you too will understand. It's the attitude the men who first builded this town, who first staked out their claims, caught in measure as they were capable. Inevitably a very little of the same spirit lives here yet, will continue to live for generations. It's the tolerance of man for every other man; the tolerance instinctively caught from the example of mother nature." As suddenly as it had roused the long figure relaxed and he took up a fresh cigar.

"With your permission, Mrs. Thurston," he digressed unemotionally, "I'll smoke again. Frankly, I'm not accustomed to this grade of tobacco." He eyed the long perfecto in his fingers equivocally. "It's spell is irresistible."

Apparently his companion did not hear him. She was looking straight past—and at nothing.

"Tolerance"—she repeated his *motif* absently, meditatively—"tolerance"—with her the suggestion carried no meaning in the abstract; its application was instinctively concrete; "lack of tolerance, yes, that's the trouble, the stumbling block, the unpardonable sin; unreasoning, colossal, egotistic intolerance! But give that attitude human form, the form of a man and—God!" She was silent.

Bruce Watson smoked on without comment. The storm was inevitable—sometime; as well it came now as later. Moreover, the atmosphere was always clearer thereafter. He waited.

"Doctor," it had come very quickly, he felt the first breath in the tense voice, "you won't ask me why I'm here, so I'm going to tell you, going to draw the story in by the ears, for I wish you to know now before we get any better—acquainted." She was observing him for a clew, but there was none and her colour heightened.

"I'm not—bad; I won't admit it to anyone. I don't expect the impossible of life. I ceased long ago to dream. I'm simply a woman, a living woman, with red blood, like a man, in my arteries, with a restlessness, again like a man, dogging me night and day." One of the white arms flung out rebelliously. She drew a long breath.

"I won't insult you by asking you if you ever had a romance in your own life, if you can understand. I'll merely begin by saying I had mine and married, as any other girl under the same conditions would

have done. I was in love, desperately so, I fancied; it was eight years ago, and I was a mere girl. I thought Mr. Thurston, Elmer, was a god. He filled my horizon completely. We had just met and he was always with me, always planning some amusement, some pleasure in common. We travelled for a couple of months—it was all the conventional thing, as neither of us lacked money—and were perfectly happy; at least I was. I never thought of the future, the present was wholly adequate, wholly satisfying.” She paused again, her hands folded in her lap.

“You’ll pardon me a bit for being a—bore, doctor? I repeat I must tell you?”

No answer was expected and none given.

“We returned and Mr. Thurston took up his life where he had left off—before I entered his scheme of things. He was very consistent about it, all brokers are, very exemplary. No one could have expected him to alter his scheme to meet my needs,” the nostrils widened unconsciously, “the needs of a mere woman; but from the very day of return we commenced to drift apart. He began going downtown early, and returning early or late as the case might be. Evenings, to be sure, we went to things—when he was free; but like the majority of men he branded society useless and the theatre tiresome. More and more he came to be not at liberty. He was consistent perfectly, there was always an excuse, a good excuse, but in result we saw each other less and

less, became in consequence less and less friends." The full red lips curled at the memory. "The same thing has occurred I suppose a million times before, will continue recurring to the end."

Again it was not a pause which demanded or anticipated comment.

"I suppose," went on the voice, "if I'd been as he took it for granted I was, as the years went by I'd have conformed, have done all the inane conventional things women of leisure do to kill time; but instead I rebelled. The idea of a god had passed—I was growing wiser; but a friend at least I demanded, I would have. I told him this and he smiled. The mere suggestion that he had been otherwise struck him as humorous. I requested, more than requested, pleaded, for a return to the first comradeship. I didn't give up without a struggle—and his eyebrows lifted at the fantastic notion of neglecting business. I swore that unless he did, if he wouldn't alter his life as I'd altered mine, I'd—I don't know what I said I'd do, I was reckless, but at least it wasn't a promise of anything conventional—and he smiled again. He didn't believe me. In his egotism it never occurred to him that I was flesh and blood like he himself, that the same restless activity which with him found vent in the intensity of business, the excitement of Exchange, must in my case find some vent likewise. It was all a tempest in a teapot. He wouldn't even discuss the suggestion seriously. If I was enough of a child to cry for the moon, obviously

there was but one thing to do, and he did it. He went downtown and left me alone."

"In which condition," enigmatically, "you didn't remain long, I anticipate?"

Again the woman searched the listener for a clew, but the long face was a mask.

"Yes," the fire had for the moment left the voice, "you're right. I didn't remain alone long. I remember the night, although it was two years ago, as distinctly as yesterday. It was right after dinner, much earlier than this, that Mr. Thurston left, and in five minutes I'd laid my plans. I sent for a man I knew—who he was is immaterial, but at least he was nothing to me then or ever after, for in spite of everything there was still but one man in my world—and was dressing feverishly. When he came, very mystified, I explained what I wished and—God"—no apathy in the voice now—"God, what an opinion you rulers have of your subjects! His expression stands out like a cameo on my memory now. I almost lost courage. And we went away together; downtown too. What we did, like the identity of the man himself, is immaterial. We went to the theatre, and to Rector's afterward, and dined and wined. It was all commonplace, except that I was married and he was not—which perhaps isn't so uncommon either. I was a good companion—I think; leastways I played the part so well that he never suspected me, and at last when it was late,—or early,—sufficiently, we returned. Out of the carriage window as we came up

the avenue I could see a light in the library and I knew Elmer had come home and was waiting for me.

“What followed you can imagine—no, you can’t! This wasn’t a scene in a play. It was real, real; real as life. I didn’t stop for anything, but went right up the stairs and walked in. He was sitting, lounging as you are, only in evening clothes, and smoking. There were the stumps of two other cigars on the tray beside him. I noticed them and knew that he’d been waiting for some time. He didn’t have a book or a magazine or even a paper. He hadn’t been doing a thing but wait. I took off my hat deliberately and tossed my cloak over a chair, and he made no comment. There was another seat opposite and I sat down facing him. The minutes flew—I was not contrite nor afraid—and neither of us said anything, merely looked at each other. He fancied, I could read him like a book, that I would give in, would explain, would beg his pardon, would at least make a scene; but I’d gotten beyond that. The cigar he was smoking was becoming hot, he never burned them over halfway, and he tossed it aside for a fresh one. Of a sudden at the motion I had an inspiration.

“‘Elmer,’ I indicated the holder as though it were the sugar canister, ‘will you please give me a—cigarette.’

“He looked up as though he hadn’t caught my request.

“‘A cigarette, please,’ I repeated.

“He understood then, perfectly. I smile when I think of the time now, but at the moment—— The whole of the man, his innermost self, the unreasoning, colossal, egotistic intolerance, heritage of his ancestors, augmented generation after generation until it culminated in him, spoke in the look he gave me. Up to that moment I had hoped, had almost believed, we would sometime understand each other, would become, if not as at first, at least good friends; but on the instant that dream ended. Until that second, I think, yes, I know, I still cared for him. I was willing for anything, any abjection, if he’d only come halfway, a fraction of the way even; but that too was hopeless. For a half minute while we sat staring each other like figures in a pantomime I grew cold, cold as death, for I saw the future like a flash; then the mood shifted and I could feel the hot blood boil. They say hate is very near to love, and I believe it. I hated him that moment as I had—cared for him at first. I smiled, deliberately, mockingly fair into his eyes.

“‘You should consult an aurist, Mr. Thurston,’ I advised, speaking a bit louder. ‘I’ve already requested twice that you hand me a cigarette. The holder, I see, is full.’

“He complied then. Lord, it was a beautiful farce! A stage manager would become independent if he could reproduce it. I had never smoked before in my life nor ever have since. I hate tobacco

as you men love it; but I burned that cigarette to the bitter end, as though it was my customary, hourly pastime—and he, Elmer, watched me. His own cigar had gone out and the fact never occurred to him. I didn't say another word, nor did he. Elmer was always too much of a gentleman—save the mark—or whatever needs saving—to quarrel. He merely looked at me. At the end I got up, I was a bit dizzy and wished to be away, and took up my hat and opera cloak.

“ ‘ Good-night,’ I said.

“ ‘ Good-night,’ he repeated, and as I went out the door he was still watching me with that same dumb expression of his ancestors on his face.”

The narrative paused as though that were the end, and the speaker looked at the long figure before her expectantly, peremptorily. Watson understood.

“ And after that——” he suggested.

“ There was nothing after that,” monotonously. “ We dragged on side by side like enemies for two years. When in company we talked of commonplace things. When alone he drew into his shell like a terrapin. I couldn't get a sentence out of him. I stood it as long as I could,—the wonder is it was so long,—until I hated the conventions—as they apply to women—the intolerance, as completely as the man who stood for them. Then I came here.”

“ And he, Mr. Thurston? ”

“ He would have gone on the same until death, I think. He had nothing whatever to lose.” She

smiled bitterly. "The city is very kind and satisfying to man—if he has money."

Watson said nothing. Again he awaited the inevitable—and as before it came very swiftly.

"You have heard the story, every bit of it." The colour had returned to the dark face and the black eyes were very bright. "Will it make any difference with our acquaintance?"

"Why should it?"

"Nor prevent your calling again if I request?"

"No, not if you request."

Even yet his companion was unsatisfied.

"You—who know, don't agree with your—best people, who think me bad?" Despite her vaunted indifference she was still elementally feminine. "Isn't it so?"

"I repeat, Mrs. Thurston, morals are the essentially individual things. I believe one's own self-respect is the supreme tribunal."

"Yes, yes," the heavy brows were tightened impatiently, "I know, but I wish your own opinion, I can't ask you here again without it."

"You have already answered your question. I accept your assurance."

Again the woman looked at him as though she had discovered an element, for so long that at last Watson straightened to go. Then of a sudden he leaned back again.

"You did me the honour," he digressed, "to intimate that I interested you, Mrs. Thurston. I'm

going to return the compliment." He paused and the blue eyes tightened whimsically. "Why, with the indifference to conventionality that you feel, did you care to seek the boon vouchsafed to all suppliants here?"

"Why!" genuine surprise was in the voice. "Why, you're humorous again. What do the hundreds of others come here for? I came because I didn't care to degrade myself by producing the kind of evidence I'd have to secure against Mr. Thurston at home."

"Certainly; but why produce it?"

"Why be—free?"

"Yes. I can understand the motive of Phelps, for instance, or of little Mrs. Stuart on the floor below, with her Southern colonel and his goatee; but you——" He paused.

Involuntarily Mrs. Thurston arose. Equally involuntarily her lips curled.

"Do you fancy, Dr. Watson, after all I've told you, after what I know of marriage, that when I get back my own name once more, after I'm legally free, that I'm sufficiently lack-wit to step into the trap again?" She was superb in her sarcasm, her rebellion. "I can't believe it."

"It was but an hour ago, you remember," the speaker was still smiling inscrutably, "that you averred all emotions repeat themselves, were superior to experience."

"Granted, and I was never farther from disbe-

lief than now. Doctor"—very gradually her face broadened into the most complex of smiles—"Doctor, you grow younger and younger. You're a mere babe."

"Perhaps." Of a sudden the blue eyes were inscrutably clear as a prairie sky. "I"—he arose, decisively this time—"I merely wished to know."

His companion caught the motion and the smile disappeared.

"You're not going now?"

"Yes, it's growing late."

"Late?"

"And I've been a long time away from the office. There might be another call, you know. I'm becoming hopeful."

A moment the woman observed him in silence; then the suggestion of a frown which had appeared between the black brows vanished.

"Very well." She led the way to the corridor.
"Au revoir."

Chapter XII

THE ANCESTRAL CALL

WHEN Norman Tracy entered Mrs. Waldow's cosy little front room, Eula Felkner's room, it was with a step a shade unsteady and an exaggerated deliberation and precision of movement. Though it was evening and the single Welsbach light burned brightly, the shades fronting the street were up, and with an air of proprietorship, almost of irritation, he drew them one after the other shut. Ordinarily as he flung himself into a seat he would have offered an explanation of the action, a facetious one probably, yet at least a justification more or less of the liberty taken; but this night he did not. Instead for a long minute he sat silent in his place, his red face, decidedly flushed, resting in the palm of a redder freckled hand.

"Eula," he initiated at last abruptly, "do you remember what happened two weeks ago to-day?"

"Yes." The girl fingered the book in her lap which she had laid down at his entrance—a new novel he had bought for her in the morning. "I came to Sioux Falls just half a month ago this noon."

"You haven't, after all, forgotten the time, then?" The voice was equivocal. "I thought perhaps you had."

"The idea!" Unsuspecting, the brown eyes were still fastened demurely on the brilliant cover. "I couldn't forget if I wished. They've been the biggest, fullest two weeks I ever spent in my life. I have to count back daily to convince myself it's not been two—years."

The man opposite eyed her steadily, relentlessly. The alcohol in his brain perverted the appeal of the heightened colour on her cheeks.

"Has it seemed so long, then, so long in spite of anything I could do?"

"Norman!" reproachfully.

"You just said—two years; certainly——"

"Norman Tracy," she paused to decide whether or not she was in earnest, "you always persist in misunderstanding; just to hear me protest, I think. They were long because I've lived so much in them, because I've been so"—the red flame mounted higher and higher—"so completely, unbelievably happy."

"Happy!" Unconsciously the lashless eyes caught the glow. "Happy, Eula?"

"Yes." The girl turned away. "Yes, happy, Norman."

"Why, girlie?" He was mercilessly insistent for the confession. "Tell me why."

The lobe of the tiny ear turned toward his fairly burned.

"Why? You ask such foolish questions. Isn't it enough that I have you all to myself, you, with no one else between?"

The freckled hands folded in the man's lap as he straightened in his seat.

"You are satisfied, then, perfectly satisfied; find the present, your life, everything wholly adequate?"

"Yes." The brown head nodded emphatic confirmation. "Yes, I don't dare think I'm so happy. I'm hoping it'll be like this always."

"And I," the voice was very low, very intimate, "and I, Eula?"

"And you!" The girl wheeled half about. "And you? I don't think I understand."

The lids dropped a bit over the man's eyes.

"Have you never been hungry, girlye?"

"A very little." She was observing him wonderingly. "At outings sometimes——"

"Never for a day even?"

"Yes, once," the mystery increased, "before papa died. We went on a picnic early in the morning and the baskets were missent. I remember——"

"Just recall that day, then, and multiply it by fourteen," he looked at her meaningly, "the time you've been here. Do you understand?"

The brown eyes wavered, though she tried to hold them steady. Yes, she understood—now.

"I'd never thought of you as being that way at all, Norman," she halted. "I've taken it for granted that you were like myself, perfectly content."

The leaven was working and the man held his peace. He even took a sort of gambler's pleasure in speculating what she of her own will would offer.

"I suppose, now that I think of it," she was turning the pages of the book unconsciously, swiftly, "I have seemed a bit—distant to you. But I didn't mean it that way, Norman." She essayed a timid glance. "I want to do what you wish. I—oh, it's so hard for a girl to speak what I wish to say—— I trust you so, and still—I can't explain it at all." She was winking furiously, and yet the tears gathered perforce. "I do so wish to be—good!"

Still Tracy made no comment; but the girl did not dare to look up—then. Down in the depths of her consciousness, hidden even from herself, the fact remained that this man dominated her absolutely, to the exclusion of reason, of self-respect, of inherited ideals of right and wrong; and like a trapped wild thing she was afraid. She dried her eyes with little pats of the tightly rolled handkerchief. She must be doing something; the silence and inaction were intolerable.

"I'm so sorry you're not happy, Norman," she groped in repetition. "I wish I could do something more for you than I'm doing. I'll be so glad when these men give you your franchise, when we can be married—can be together all the time."

Unconsciously Tracy smiled, the inscrutable smile of a gambler who has drawn to a flush when he looks at his lone card. At last this was the proffer. She would be so glad when they could be together all the time; and that after two whole weeks of waiting and repression; of repression which was far from easy! He leaned forward, his chin in his palm.

"Is that all you can offer, Eula, all to a hungry man who loves you, whom you love?"

The girl hesitated. In many ways he had asked this same question before, in words or otherwise; but never as at this time, with this insistence.

"What is it you wish me to say, Norman?" she temporised. "Perhaps——"

"To say!" The red face flamed menacingly above the freckled hand. "What does a hungry man care for words? He can't eat them. You're not child enough to be ignorant yet of what I want, Eula!"

"Yes," she was battling desperately for time, for time to think—and she couldn't think, "yes—I believe I am."

A moment the man looked at her; then he arose deliberately.

"Very well." He was coming forward more unsteadily than before. The room was very warm. "I can't believe you so dense, but nevertheless I'll repeat." He paused oratorically. "It's you, Eula, I want, you yourself, the physical as well as the mental you." He fairly towered over her as she sat below. "You've dandled me at arm's length as long as you can, as long as I'll stand to be kept there. All patience has a limit, and I've come to mine." Of a sudden his arms dropped, his hands met and he held her like a vise.

"What I want is this, and this, and this!"

"Norman," pleadingly muffled, "Norman Tracy——"

"And this, and this!"

"Oh," as suddenly again the girl was free, and she covered her face with her hands, "oh, oh!"

The man stepped away, but did not again sit down. He merely looked at her and waited. When at last she glanced up he was smiling.

"Don't ask me again, please, what I want, Eula," he said. "You know now."

Again there was a pause for so long that Tracy started walking impatiently back and forth.

"Eula," he had stopped and the smile vanished, "in Heaven's name, how much longer do you wish to keep up this farce? We may as well understand each other right now."

"Farce!" The girl looked up and, much as he would have liked to do so, the man could not doubt her ignorance, her innocence—"farce, Norman?"

"Yes, farce," irritably. "You know as well as I what our living here together signifies, what everybody who knows of our being here thinks."

"You don't mean——" She paused. Realisation was coming too fast.

"Most certainly I do mean——"

"Even our landlady, Mrs. Waldow?"

Tracy laughed shortly. He was finding the actual disillusionment more unpleasant even than he had anticipated. But it was essential—sometime, he

consoled himself with the thought; only he wished he had prepared with a little more—rye.

“Ask her, if you doubt me.”

The girl arose and stood facing him, her hands behind her clutching the top of the reading table.

“No, I won’t ask her. I understand her—manner now.” Of a sudden the tiny brown figure was steady, unbelievably steady. Temporarily fear of the man before her had passed. With the fading of disillusionment another thing had also vanished never to return: her girlhood. She had become a woman. As a woman she looked at her companion open-eyed.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “I think you’re right. We may as well understand each other now.” She stopped to moisten her lips, but the words came even as the lines of a play. “I see, after all, I’ve been a child, an innocent, a—what my mother said I was when I left; but that doesn’t help at the present. That I thought I was good, that I trusted you absolutely, doesn’t count either. The thing to know is just how much of a dupe I have been, how much of you is true, and—and start from there.”

She paused, and, despite the effrontery of partial intoxication, Tracy observed her almost with open mouth. He even felt a childish desire to pinch himself to see if he were really awake, to make sure that this self-controlled little brown woman facing him was really the helpless, unsophisticated Eula Felkner of a quarter hour before.

"And start from there," she repeated monotonously.

Norman Tracy awoke. In his composite egotistical nature one emotion was never long absent, recurred as inevitably as individual incidents occurred: anger, mild or intense—and it came now. The exact reason for its coming, the explicit offence to be resented, he could not have given, did not even try to analyse. He only knew that every spark of contrition he had felt at the sight of Eula at his mercy vanished with Eula on the defensive.

"Yes, I agree with you," he satirised. "It'll be well for both of us to forget the past and start anew from the present." His look became the leer of the mildly inebriate. "What, if you please, are you going to do about it?"

The tiny brown figure stiffened, her face whitened. If there had still remained in her mind an illusion it vanished that instant.

"What am I going to do about it?" Unconsciously she moistened her lips afresh. She would have given anything for a glass of water; but none was handy, and she would not ring. As suddenly as had come the alteration from girl to woman had come the instinct to fight, and she would not even seem to need assistance by calling a third person. An independence of which she had never vaguely dreamed herself possessed had come breathless to her aid. She opened a window wide instead.

"What am I going to do about it?" she repeated.

"First of all I'm going to ask you a few questions." She had returned to her first position, her hands behind her gripping the table top. "You'll have no objection to answering, I presume?"

Tracy bowed elaborately and regained his equilibrium with difficulty.

"I am at your service, absolutely."

"To begin, then, you've been—drinking, haven't you? I wish to take that into consideration." She looked at him steadily, but without a trace of anger; the man marked that even then. "I didn't notice when you entered, Norman, but I can't help understanding now."

The man made an effort to appear offended, and at ease, but ineffectually.

"Yes, I have," he blurted defiantly.

"You hadn't intended me to know, intended this—disillusionment so soon?"

Tracy made a swift gesture, of protest, of negation.

"No, there you're mistaken. I did it deliberately. I haven't touched a drop before since you came. To repeat, this farce has gone on long enough. I wished an understanding to-night."

"I—see. You had the whole scheme in mind from the first, when you induced me to come?"

"Yes." Against his will the man's resentment was ebbing, she was so quiet and matter-of-fact. He even began to wonder if after all her attitude meant—what he had originally fancied. "Yes, it was the

only way to get you here, Eula. The only way possible for us to get—together."

"And you never intended—even when we were talking of it, for us to be married now?"

"No, it would be impossible now, Eula."

The brown fingers slid back and forth across the table edge meditatively.

"Why impossible, please? The—franchise?" It was the last death struggle of hope.

"The—franchise!" Tracy laughed openly.

"Lord, you swallowed the bait beautifully, Eula. I never saw a bass take a minnow better. No, it's not on account of the franchise."

"I gather that too was a myth, a—necessary means to get me where I am now?"

Tracy shifted uneasily. He felt there was an undercurrent flowing of which he was being kept in ignorance.

"Certainly. I wouldn't invest money in a dinky little town like this if I were rich as Cræsus. If I had money to burn I'd burn it and be done with the thing."

"What then is the reason we couldn't be married now, Norman?" Involuntarily the soft oval chin stiffened in anticipation. "Tell me, I don't believe you can hurt me more."

Again Tracy felt the undercurrent, and unconsciously he too straightened. Time and the cold night air was sobering him rapidly.

"The reason, Eula," he was watching her intently

as a naturalist a strange bug under his lens, "is simply because I couldn't. I'm married already!"

For a half minute the room was very still, so still that the flapping of the shade in the night wind sounded in comparison like the steady tapping of workmen's hammers. At last even histrionic Norman Tracy was satisfied with his climax and threw out a crumb.

"It's not so bad as you imagine, after all, Eula," he explained in forced matter of fact. "I'm married now, but just a few weeks longer and I won't be." It was almost an attempt at extenuation. "You know what Sioux Falls is noted for. I think you'll understand now why I'm here. I'm merely one of the hundred colonists." He had an inspiration. "And you," he added, "are merely one of the hundred reasons the colonists are here."

"I—see." The red lips opened in the ghost of a smile; a mocking, ghastly smile. "I presume I understand now—everything." The smile, like a frosty breath, was turned on her companion.

"You've nothing more to reveal, have you?"

Tracy hesitated, a furrow between his brows. He wished to be angry, the occasion seemed somehow to demand it, but he could hit upon no tangible reason.

"Yes," he admitted slowly, "I believe there's nothing more to reveal. You understand now—everything."

Eula Felkner's brown head nodded grave corroboration.

"Everything of the past, until to-night. The future, as it concerns you and me, is yet—obscure." The sorry little smile vanished. Her face became rigid as before. "Granted we can't be married now, after you become free—you see I am taking you at your word—what then?"

Longer than before Norman Tracy hesitated; at last he started walking again, restlessly, rebelliously. For a long minute and another he strode back and forth the breadth of the glaring oriental rug.

"What'll I do then," he said, "I can't say. I won't say. The woman doesn't live that I'd promise again to marry. I've had my experience, my lesson, Eula." Once more, consciously or unconsciously, it was almost an effort at extenuation. "I'll never repeat the error."

For the first time the dark face of Eula Felkner whitened.

"Never, Norman, not even to—me? Think before you answer, please. This may mean a great deal to—to both of us."

"No." The answer came quickly, indecently quickly. "I'm honest with you now, absolutely honest. I wouldn't promise even you, Eula."

"You don't care for me enough, Norman?" tensely.

"No, it isn't that. I want you, more than I want anything else on earth; but I'll not bind myself again." He was sober now, was Norman Tracy. Confirmed alcoholic, the effect of the liquor he had drank passed

rapidly. "You must not ask it, Eula, it's useless."

"Useless—and still you protest you love me!" Against her will the girl's eyes flashed menacingly. "Useless, when no one knows better than you what the alternative you suggest means to a woman! Useless——" Of a sudden she paused. Like the instantaneous flash of an electric spark in a darkened room a carefully buried memory of another man and of what he had offered, pleaded for—he who had never pleaded before to a living being—leaped in contrast into her mind. Useless! Fancy him saying useless, he who had sworn with a look in his eyes she had never doubted—and even after she had said no—to still love her, protect her if necessary as long as he lived. Useless! Her throat throbbed as though it would burst, her eyes moistened. She forgot the man watching her, forgot that she must fight for her own, forgot everything except what might have been.

"Oh," she wailed, "why couldn't I have continued to care for him instead of for you? He's worth a thousand of you, a million! Why did you ever come into my life anyway?" She was soliloquising, incoherently, in abandon. "Why when I meant to be—good? Oh, it's tangled, tangled!"

"Ah!" Tracy was at ease now. The tangible lapse whereon to hang a protest had come at last and he made the most of it. "Ah, so that's the way you feel. I think I begin to understand various things now."

Eula Felkner made no defence. As quickly as had come the strength of combat, it had left. A huddled little brown heap she had sank back in the big reading chair.

"Eula," Tracy came a step forward and stood looking down at her with folded arms, "you've been asking me a lot of questions. It's no more than my due that you should answer me one in turn." His lashless eyes narrowed compellingly and he waited until she looked up. "Who is the other man you're always telling about, who plays such an important role in our affairs, anyway? What's his name and where is he? It's my right to know. I demand it."

Wide eyed the girl looked him back fair, but without a word.

"Tell me," insisted Tracy irritably. "I'm tired to death of this mystery."

"I—can't, Norman. I never can—now."

"In Heaven's name, why? You drive—Why, Eula?"

"You really wish to know, Norman?" Just a suggestion of the independence of a bit ago returned.

"Most emphatically, yes. Yes to infinity."

"I'll tell you why, then. It's because I love you, Norman, in spite of everything. I promised to let him know when we were—married, and I meant to tell you everything then, too." The heavy-lashed and the lashless eyes met in a long, long look. "If he knew I was here, knew what you'd done, he'd kill

you, Norman Tracy, as sure as God lives he'd kill you!"

Involuntarily the man fell back a step. His pitted cheeks whitened. No need to ask if what she said was true. Moral coward that he was, he was the prey of his own imagination, of the same dogging fear that had sought refuge in red liquor so many times before. He drew himself together with an effort. It was his moment, he realised that, he could not afford to think; besides, it was too late to retreat now anyway. The harm, if harm he'd caused, was done. The penalty therefor, if similarly there was a penalty, was inevitable. The end, the end he had worked for, was very near at hand. She had admitted it; unintentionally, but nevertheless certainly. His shoulders squared, his face went flushed again.

"So that's the reason you've always refused, Eula?" he voiced. "Because you love me so much?"

"Yes."

"Don't you think I'm able to take care of myself, girly?" He had come a step forward and was smiling down at her intimately. "Do I look like a mere boy?"

The girl said nothing and Tracy came closer yet.

"Don't you worry about me, Eula, nor about him, nor about anything. So long as you love me and I love you that's enough; enough for both of us. Forget the past; it's dead, dead. Now is what

counts." He had been coming closer and closer. She could feel his hot breath on her hair as he bent over. "Now, now, while I've got you and you've got me." His face, burning hot, was against her face, his arms of a sudden about her. "Forget, girlie, forget!"

For a second the girl sat still. She knew she was conquered, at the bottom of her soul knew she wished it so, at whatever price; but an instinct, a something she knew not what, must make one more fight. She stood up, breathing hard.

"Norman," she voiced, "Norman——"

For another second the man stood where he was, where she had been; then without a word he strode across the room toward the door.

"Good-bye," he said coldly.

The girl watched him, almost with terror.

"Norman——"

The man paused, but he did not look back.

"You're—going?"

"Yes, for good. I shan't trouble you again, Eula."

"What——"

"I'll leave here to-morrow. You may do as you please."

"Leave me—for always?"

"I've said so. You've made your choice."

The old helpless childish terror deepened.

"You don't mean it, Norman?"

"Don't I?" This time he turned. "You've

many things to learn yet, Eula; one of them how long you can safely play with a man. I repeat, this is good-bye."

The girl waited, waited until his hand was on the knob. She could not doubt him then.

"Norman——" It was a wail.

The man was merciless in his silence.

"Norman, come back!" A gush of hot tears blinded her so she could not see him, could not tell if he had paused. "I can't have you go, have you leave me. I can't go back home now. It's too late. You're all I've got, Norman; all in the world. Come back, please, please, come back. I'll do anything you wish, anything. Only come back." Uncertainly, gropingly, she was making her way across the room toward him. Responsive at last, the man returned just a step and halted; but she was beyond reason now, beyond thought. On and on she went, on until their bodies touched. "Oh," her arms were about him in abandon, her head on his breast. "Oh, I love you, I love you so, Norman!"

Chapter XIII

REVELATION

BRUCE WATSON did not look up as his door opened. He was sitting by the combination table desk, carefully divested of its litter and dusted for the occasion, studying with complete absorption a map as large as the top itself. For a moment his visitor stood just inside waiting; then coming forward silently she stopped by his side and looked down over his shoulder equivocally.

"Good-morning, Doctor Watson," she introduced.

"Good-morning." One of the big hands drove a pin into the board at a certain point as though from a hammer blow, another at a different spot, and still another. Then he glanced up;—"Mrs. Thurston," he completed on recognition.

The woman looked down at the map curiously. It was not an ordinary map. Large as it was, on its neutral pink background there were scarcely a dozen dots marking towns or cities; barely half that number of tortuous black lines indicating rivers. A few, a very few, curly radiating figures, conventionally designating heights, broke the monotony—both from their presence and their fanciful Indian names: "Patched Skin Buttes," "Thunder Butte," "Wedge Tent Butte," and the like; but otherwise it was mere

monotonous faded pink crossed by undeviating lines of latitude and longitude and equally arbitrary county boundaries chosen of man. The well-formed nose of the inspector tilted at the meagreness revealed.

"Pardon me, Doctor," she commented, "but I fail to see anything there sufficiently interesting to make you oblivious of a lady's entrance. To be frank, the implication is scarcely complimentary."

Watson arose with a smile.

"I have no defence to offer, Mrs. Thurston. Take my chair, please. Moreover, I hardly think I would attempt one even though it hung on the end of my tongue." He had seated himself opposite, loose-limbed, comfortable as was his wont. "To explain in a way admits the necessity of explanation and always involves one deeper and deeper."

"And in this case the mere suggestion of a necessity is preposterous!"

"Positively I refuse to become involved. Life grows shorter every minute."

"Very well," with affected reluctance. "Tell me the meaning of this pink puzzle instead. You don't mind my being curious?"

"Not in the least."

"What is it then; a continent yet unexplored?"

Watson leaned back. His big-jointed fingers clasped in his lap and he looked the facetious questioner opposite gravely. Unconsciously, as ever when he became serious, and it seemed he was always so, in sympathy the curl left his companion's lip.

"That, Mrs. Thurston, is my country, the place where until six years ago I've lived from the time I can remember. Don't make sport of it, please. It's like laughing at one's mother."

"Pardon me, Doctor." Genuine contrition was in the low voice. "I didn't understand. Tell me about it, please; I'm interested."

The man said nothing, but his wide-set eyes partially closed.

"Please tell me," repeated insistently.

"There's nothing much to tell, Mrs. Thurston;" even yet he hesitated, as if loth to speak; "very little to show you, though you were there with me. It's all prairie, prairie so far as you can see, from horizon to horizon, from infinity to infinity. Go out in the centre of it and you grow to fancy the whole world is flat, or merely slightly rolling, just enough to break the monotony; get up in the morning and in every direction you see grass, grass; that, and nothing more. But it's enough. It tells you everything you need to know. Its colour indicates the season of the year. Its growth, rank or scant, predicts the weather you may expect better than a government forecast. Its variety is guide unfailing. If it's buffalo grass, and you're a native, you don't even have to open your eyes. Its odour is unmistakable in your nostrils. If it's alkali grass, by the same code you still know where you are. You travel all day, from darkness to darkness. The next morning you arise—and you wouldn't know you'd stirred from your first camp. From sky to sky

there's stretched the same softly waving carpet, the same message of friendship. That's the beauty of it, the fascination. You're always acquainted, always at home. It's—wonderful." He paused; a light in his blue eyes the listener had never seen there before.

Mrs. Thurston drew a long breath.

"How you—love it!" she halted. "I never believed before a person could love a bit of earth so."

Watson smiled in silence, the reflection of native prairie still on his face.

"I believe you care for it more than for human beings, more than for anyone."

Still the doctor said nothing; only smiled with those great, wide-set eyes of his, the eyes which told everything and—nothing.

For a long time, a time longer than either realised, they sat so in silence; and gradually there came to the woman an understanding, a conviction of certainty, concerning many things about which before she could but speculate. Very slowly, with the knowledge, her brown head lowered, her face fell into her hands and, elbows spread wide, she observed him openly.

"Doctor," she paused until he met her eye, "I wish to ask you a question, a personal question. May I?"

The great bushy head nodded permission, smiling permission.

"A dozen if you wish, Mrs. Thurston."

"No, one—or two are enough." The black

brows contracted intensely. "What puzzles me is—is you yourself, the inconsistency of you. With your disposition, loving this wild life as you do, I can't see the logic of events which put you where you are now. Why is it, please?"

"There was no logic involved." The smile repeated itself. "Otherwise I shouldn't be here."

"The reason, then? At least you had a motive."

"Yes, there was a motive; a very definite one six years ago. Like all children, I wished to see the world, life, Mrs. Thurston."

"And"—irony tinged the even sentence—"and you found that for which you searched, Doctor?"

"In a measure, yes. I found—life."

"And you didn't like it after you'd found it?"

"No." The blue eyes were unruffled as at first. "You're mistaken in that premise. I did like it. That's why I'm what I am now."

"And still you're going to leave here, leave—civilisation." The long lashes indicated the map and the pin-dotted trail triumphantly. "You won't attempt to deny that to me?"

"No, there's no secret about it, Mrs. Thurston. I'm going back—back where I left off."

One of the brown hands dropped to the table irritably.

"Doctor, you're—maddening. You're inconsistent as a—man."

"Inconsistent?"

"Yes. You say you like a certain thing, a cer-

tain life, and then in the same breath admit you're going to leave it. You're impossible!"

"You overlooked the preterite, Mrs. Thurston."

"The preterite!"

"Yes. There was a time when a reason, an adequate reason, existed for the change. It's no longer in evidence is all."

The wide eyes tightened understandingly and again the elbows spread wide.

"The same as the incentive for making a success of a work, which is not your work, has ceased to exist?"

"Exactly."

"I see." At last the full meaning of the man's position, the sacrifice of it, the pathos, the tragedy, the comedy—whatever it was—came to the woman and the questions halted. It was like a page out of a novel turned to life, and she was feminine.

"I see," she repeated musingly. "I see."

"That's easily credible." Watson was looking out of the window onto the sooty, gravelled roof of the big hotel. "It's all very simple. Every human being goes through the same experience some time in life, I fancy. The only difference is that some never go back—back where they left off."

"Yes," his companion caught up the phrase meditatively, equivocally, "some people never go back, never return to their old life, never! By the way, when are you going to start? You haven't told me that yet."

"I don't know, Mrs. Thurston."

"Don't know?" incredulously.

"No. It may be to-morrow. It may be a year from now."

"Doctor," a suggestion of rebuke came into the black eyes, "you're unfair with me again."

Two sparrows were fighting fiercely on the sooty roof opposite, and the man watched them impassively.

"You mean you won't tell me," reproachfully.

Conquered and conqueror flitted away and Watson faced about.

"I repeat, I don't know. There's a reason why; but I can't tell you that."

"I think it's unnecessary, Doctor." Of a sudden the red lips parted triumphantly. "You're very transparent, Bruce Watson."

The child-wide eyes neither broadened nor closed.

"And very, very foolish."

Still no response; only the impassive wait which invariably brought to light all things.

"Doctor," as suddenly again the mood had altered, "I wish you to promise me something. Will you?"

"What is it, please?"

"Promise me without question." One hand left the brown chin irritably. "Trust me that much."

A moment the man hesitated.

"Very well, I promise," he said.

"It's that whenever you leave you'll let me know before you go."

"And why, please?"

"You'll not forget you promised?"

"No."

The hand returned to the chin. The dark face grew swarthier. For an instant while she paused the great arteries throbbed visibly at her throat.

"The reason, Bruce Watson, is because I'm going with you."

Involuntarily the muscles of the man's thin face tightened just a shade. His nostrils widened like those of a thoroughbred in a race. That was all.

"Because I'm going with you when you go," repeated the voice insistently.

"I heard you, Mrs. Thurston," very quietly.

His companion made a wry face.

"Mrs. Thurston!" Once more the brown chin stood out alone. "Don't use that word again, please. The person of that name no longer lives; ceased to exist two weeks ago. Do you know whom you're addressing, sir?"

"Time indeed moves rapidly, Miss Berkeley."

"Bruce Watson, you—knew all the time?"

"There was a column write-up, at the date you mention, in a New York paper." As though under the hand of a master artist the wrinkles radiated afresh. "My own humble name even figured to a minor extent."

For a moment the woman was very still.

"Someone here who knows us both, disliked us both, sent in the story, I suppose?"

"Doubtless."

"Norman Tracy, I presume?"

Watson said nothing, and his companion observed him equivocally.

"Doesn't he realise that he lives in a glass house?"

"He's ceased to do so, Miss Berkeley. He too is—free."

The equivocal look became definite, of wonder.

"You know his life here, Doctor?"

The man nodded.

"And still you said nothing—did not retaliate?"

"Life is very short. What he's doing is no affair of mine."

"Bruce Watson, you're—I don't know what! You're either more than human, or less!"

The other waited.

"I don't believe you're capable of either loving or hating."

Silence still.

"You won't even be a good—acquaintance." The flame was growing by its own fuel; the repression and rebellion of past weeks. "You're cold and self-contained as clay."

The desk chair creaked softly as again Watson turned to the window and the sooty roof.

"I can't even imagine why I'm taking the trouble to tell you all this. You're not listening."

"You're mistaken, Miss Berkeley," evenly.
"Most assuredly I'm listening."

For an instant there was a pause in the storm; but for an instant only.

"Why don't you defend yourself, then?" With one swift movement she arose and moved over to the casement. "It's I who am listening now."

"I have no defence to make."

"No need, you think?"

Watson said nothing, and for a moment the woman observed him ironically; then her face softened.

"Pardon me, Doctor, I didn't mean that." She bit at her lip savagely. "I'm desperate again to-day. I want to do something right now and I've not the remotest idea what. Logically, I'm through here and ought to go back where I came from; but I'm not going back." The daintiest of fairywork handkerchiefs went to her offended lip, and when it returned it bore a tiny blotch of red. "I hate the thought of it all back there; the conventionality, the affectation, the grooves worn of our fathers—the unspeakable intolerance. I hate it! I hate it!" She ventured a downward glance. "I was serious when I asked you to promise me what you did. There's no one living, nothing on earth, to prevent my doing as I wish; and I wish to see this other life—this life you know. Remember what I say, Bruce Watson. When you go West, I go too, go with you."

There was an appreciable pause.

"With my—knowledge, Miss Berkeley?" very quietly at last.

"Yes. With your knowledge and consent."

"And in what capacity, please?"

"In any you choose." The black eyes were unfaltering. "You—understand. We are no longer children."

Again for a space the man looked out the window, at the curling lifting column of smoke from the big hostelry—black as ink against the background of the clearest of blue prairie skies—at a fresh pair of sparrows settling another dispute on the dirty ledge, at a flock of mottled pigeons circling high overhead, drifting aimlessly in the pure joy of freedom and life. At last, very slowly, he arose and stretched himself with the old, old trick of perfect physical well being. Simultaneously from the angles of his eyes radiated the ever ready wrinkles.

"On a day like this, Miss Berkeley," he commented deliberately, "earth herself is good enough to live on. Let's come back to her."

His companion's black eyes flashed warningly.

"You mean to imply I've been dreaming?"

"I think we've both been a bit—exalted."

The woman came forward a step, swiftly, passionately.

"You personally, though, don't believe I was in earnest when I said—what I did say?"

"I believe you believe you are desperate. I can understand that. We're all that way sometimes."

"But my going with you," insistently. "You think I'll not go?"

"I know you'll not, Miss Berkeley."

"The reason, please?" A menace was in the suddenly narrowed lids. "Tell me why, Doctor."

"Why?" Once more it was the repressedly impassive, the unsmiling Bruce Watson who spoke. "Because I'll not permit you to do so." He met the menace fairly, openly. "Certainly you've trusted me much too far to fancy I'll take advantage of you now, Miss Berkeley."

"But"—against her will the woman's anger was ebbing—"but when it's my wish, when I go with my eyes wide open?"

"Don't argue the matter, please." Unconsciously the man's arms folded across the broad chest. "It's impossible."

For a second the place was very still, so still that his companion's rapid breathing sounded as one running.

"Bruce Watson," of a sudden she had come forward and held him, a hand on either shoulder, compellingly, "Bruce Watson, can't you understand that I—love you?"

"No," very gently, "I can't understand, but I—believe you."

"You believe me?" It was almost a cry of triumph. "Why, then, is what I ask impossible? Your own love, your boy love, is past. You admit it. Can't you possibly"—the tense voice bore a plea now, an all but breathless plea—"care for me a little."

Very erect, very steady, stood long Watson;

but this time his face whitened, sharpened. In a flash he seemed to have grown almost old.

"I repeat, Miss Berkeley," he said slowly, "I can't discuss it with you. I've done very wrong to have made this moment—inevitable."

"Wrong, Bruce Watson?" As suddenly as she had taken him captive the black head had dropped to his shoulder. "Wrong? It seems you're never wrong. That's the worst of it. I can't be angry with you when I wish. You're a—god, Bruce Watson, my god. Oh, I never really, truly cared for anyone before; I realise it all now. But I love—you." She was sobbing hysterically, in abandon, "Love you! love you!"

For a second, a long second, the man did not stir. In it a Power all-seeing and he himself only knew how near he fell.

"Miss Berkeley," with an effort he was free, his great bony hands clasped behind his back, "in Mother Nature's name don't tempt me any more. Like every other man, I'm human. Go, please; I ask it as a favour. We're mad, both of us, mad!"

Once again over the tiny struggling human pawns fell silence, the interim of reconstruction.

"Am I to understand," the voice had grown unbelievably formal, unbelievably cold, "that you refuse my offer?"

The great bushy head made a motion of deprecation, almost of weariness.

"Answer me, please," curtly.

"Yes."

They looked each other fair, and it was not the man's eyes which first dropped.

"Very well, then. Most assuredly I'll leave." The brown chin was high in the air, but nevertheless she lingered unnecessarily, patting her hair, adjusting her hat afresh, going through all her transparent little tricks to consume time. At last she started toward the door; but halfway paused as at a sudden thought.

"I came over to-day," she ignored haltingly, "to ask your presence at a little chafing dish lunch at my rooms to-morrow night." Irresistibly she coloured. "May I have the pleasure of your company?"

Something like a convulsion passed over the doctor's face, and in motion of pure instinct he walked over to the window and stood looking down onto the shifting units of the city's one busy street. Thirty mocking seconds slipped by.

"Thank you, very much, Miss Berkeley," he voiced at last, "but I can't come."

"Can't—come?" steadily.

"I am sure it were better not—for both of us."

As powder flashes the hot colour started in upward journey on the woman's cheek. Again the black eyes narrowed. The menace would not leave so easily this time.

"You mean this is to be the end?" She had turned fairly about, openly hostile. "That our—ac-

quaintance of the last few months is to cease now—to-day? ”

The man did not answer, she did not expect him to, yet her grievance grew at his silence. While one could count ten slowly she looked at him, her colour heightening, her breath coming more and more quickly, the portent deepening in the black eyes. At last came the inevitable, and like a deluge escaping she stepped close, her dark face working uncontrollably.

“Bruce Watson,” she blazed, “you’re a pitiful, timid child; one clutching its mother’s skirts and grovelling in terror at its own reflection. You think you love the wild, think you’re a part of it.” She paused for breath. “Lord, you’re as domesticated as a barnyard fowl. Fancy one really of the type doing as you are doing; refusing what you have refused!” She tried to laugh, but her throat was choking and she could not. “Doubtless you fancy you’re very, very noble to thus withstand temptation. Probably so long as you live you’ll gloat over this day, felicitate yourself upon it.” This time she did laugh; a horrible, unnatural laugh. “Temptation!” She gave ironic accent, syllable for syllable. “You don’t even know the meaning of the word. You, a stone, feel a human passion? It’s incredible. You couldn’t. You’re fundamentally incapable.” Once more interrupted the laugh, unmusical, hysterical. “You may continue to delude yourself, Bruce Watson, but you can’t deceive me any longer. I know

you; you yourself. You're clay where I thought you flesh and blood; ashes where I fancied to find fire." She halted from pure exhaustion, but the black eyes were unappeased, burned fiercer and more fiercely. "Oh, I hate you, Bruce Watson. Hate you! Hate you!"

Through it all the man had not stirred, had not made a sound; nor did he now. Like a figure in the clay to which she had compared him he continued looking down, down at the crawling drays, the scurrying cabs, the bustling pedestrians of the busy prairie city street. Yet, if he took note of what he saw, he gave no sign. Now and then the lashes closed over the wide blue eyes, once he moistened his lips; but that was all. So long as she could endure the silence, the inaction, the woman lingered, awaited a defence which she knew as well as she knew it was day would never come. Once she took a step forward and for the fraction of a second the hard eyes softened; then as suddenly, her red under lip tight between cruel, mutilating teeth, she turned swiftly to the exit. Involuntarily, her hand on the knob, she paused; breathless, listening. But there was no sound; and with a sob, which all her resolve could not subdue, the door closed behind her.

Down the groaning elevator of the Minnehaha Building she went in a daze. The boy in charge looked at her curiously, but she did not notice. Outside, oblivious to danger, she started straight across the street. A hurrying hack all but rode her down,

the driver drawing up, with a curse and a play of sparks from the horses' shod feet, just in time—and she was totally unconscious of her escape. With the closing of the office door volition had passed into temporary abeyance. It was pure instinct which guided her up to her own room, which caused her to draw the shades until even with the bright sunlight without the room was in semi-shadow. It was blind habit which prompted her to remove hat and coat. It was neither, however, which scarcely a moment later sent her back to the window and gazing surreptitiously through a tiny rift into a certain room on the sixth floor of the big building opposite. Nevertheless for a full half hour she watched; until the last vestige of anger had left the glorious black eyes, until she could no longer distinguish anything through the mist gathering thicker and thicker. For in all that time the figure she was watching, the figure which remained precisely as when she herself had left the room, had not stirred!

Chapter XIV

ASHES

INVOLUNTARILY Stephen Phelps drew back when he saw who his visitor was; but Norman Tracy, uninvited, came in as though he were accustomed to making a daily call.

"Don't worry," he smiled as, again unrequested, he settled himself comfortably in the biggest, easiest chair, "I didn't call to challenge you, though I've no doubt you deserve it. I just learned to-day that you were still in town—I supposed you'd flown months ago—so I decided to drop in and see what's the trouble." He observed his obviously reluctant host with genuine amusement. "Having difficulties, are you?"

Phelps returned the look; at first with open hostility, then, as gradually the old fascination of the other's presence became dominant, almost with admiration.

"Tracy," he shifted from one leg to the other vacillatingly, "your nerve is something magnificent. After the last time we met, to——"

"Sit down and forget it." The visitor pre-empted the position of host with a hospitable wave of his hand. "Let bygones be bygones. We," he generously included the other in the past fault, "we were both doubtless a bit hasty that other afternoon."

Phelps laughed ironically, but nevertheless he obeyed.

"I suppose," he satirised, "that your return means you have use for me again. Needless to say, you'd never take the trouble otherwise."

"Frankly, yes." Tracy ignored the innuendo with fine magnanimity. "I'm restless as a comet to-day." He swept the room searchingly. "Got anything cool about to drink, have you?"

In silence Phelps pressed a bell and, as a minute later a shock-headed boy in buttons appeared, gave an order.

Over twin cold bottles of beer Tracy sighed in satisfaction.

"Gad," he emphasised, "I believe I'll move back here to the hotel." He paused to empty his glass. "I will to-morrow. After all, this is the only place in town to live; the one spot to find even a suggestion of comfort."

Against his will Phelps thawed at the implied confidence. Moreover, his curiosity was aroused.

"What's the matter?" His tone was exaggeratedly blasé. "Has the flame on South Phillips Avenue burned dead already?"

"Yes, long ago." Tracy emptied a second glass without a pause. "I'm too old to conduct a kindergarten."

Phelps inspected the label on the bottle before him equivocally.

"The lady's still in town I judge, however?"

"Yes, she'll probably stay here for a time yet at least." The visitor flashed a glance of sudden suspicion; but the other's boy face was as guilelessly placid as a mountain pool, and the inspector was satisfied. "I've arranged everything. She'll make a mighty good investment out of this summer." He emptied the bottle deliberately and drained the glass. "In one respect at least my ancestors were kind to me; the matter of money." He laughed curtly. "It's about the only instance which I've ever been able to discover."

Phelps said nothing, and after a moment Tracy himself touched the call bell.

"It's my turn this time," he justified.

The fresh order before them the visitor sat a bit longer in silence, smiling enigmatically.

"How's the club?" he queried at last. "Still in existence, is it?"

"Yes," shortly. The recollection was yet galling.

"Any of the old guard left?" cheerfully.

"No, everyone is gone except you and me and—Watson." Phelps straightened in aroused interest. "By the way, that man Watson's an enigma. I can watch him daily from the windows here, you know. He sticks to his office as though he were glued fast. I don't believe I've seen him on the street once this summer."

Tracy scowled in disapproving silence, and under full steam Phelps checked himself. He even flushed.

"Come to think of it, Mrs. Thurston is still here," he digressed hastily.

Tracy's face cleared at the obvious homage.

"Yes," the voice grew confidentially intimate again, "and for the life of me I can't make out what she's staying for. Do you know?"

The other shook his head.

"I've never become acquainted with her except by sight, you remember," he explained.

Tracy drained another measure of beer and wiped his lips deliberately.

"I'd give—more than you'd believe—to know," significantly.

Again Phelps took remarkable interest in the label on his bottle; turning it from side to side the better to see.

"And by God, I'll find out, or my name isn't Norman Tracy."

This time Phelps looked up shrewdly.

"So that's the reason!" he suggested ambiguously.

"I was wondering—after what you said of the other—affair."

"Yes." Tracy showed no resentment. "I'd have gone two months ago otherwise." He drank the last of the second bottle absently. His thirst was as a desert. "Frankly, that woman baffles me, Phelps. As it happens I knew her in New York ten years ago, before she was married, and I've met her off and on ever since." He paused, and the bare lids narrowed over his eyes malignantly. "Between you and me,

she's the one woman in my life whom I've wanted to get near to and failed."

Phelps wriggled uncomfortably. He foresaw a stormy session.

"She's been married, you remember," he palliated. "Some women, you know——"

"Yes," hotly, "but she isn't married now, damn her, and she ignores me more than before. What do you suppose she did a while ago when I called?"

Phelps had a suspicion, but he wisely refrained from the admission.

"I haven't the slightest idea," he lied.

"Well, she refused to see me. She's taken a house out in the suburbs this summer, you know. And worse than all, that cursed French maid of hers slammed the door in my very face." The miniature forest of empty bottles jingled against each other as the visitor's fist struck the board. "Yes, fair in my face, as though I were a dirty tramp."

Inadvertently the boy man smiled. The temptation was irresistible.

"Phelps, damn you!" No mistaking the meaning of that tone.

"Pardon me." The smile disappeared like a schoolboy caricature behind a moistened sponge at the master's approach. "You must admit, however, it was rather humorous."

"Humorous, perhaps." Tracy made a wry face. "But I'll win out yet. All women are alike—if you've got patience." The boundless egotism of the

man came to his rescue. "She doesn't know me. I can wait; but some day she'll pay dear for that insult. You mark my words. Some day there'll be a reckoning."

Phelps bit his lip to keep silence. Never before, sober or otherwise, had the other shown himself as he really was so completely, so shamelessly. No model personally, the revelation nevertheless nauseated the confidante. He had previously believed the type existed only in fiction.

"But I'm wandering from my original purpose." Tracy was making an effort to be companionable. "You haven't told me yet what's keeping you here."

"Oh, nothing much." For the first time in their acquaintance Phelps felt an extreme distaste to mention his own affairs. "In fact, the matter will be settled out of court this week."

"What's to be settled?" Tracy frowned warningly at the threatened mutiny. "You've roused my curiosity."

Very near to actual revolt was the boy man that moment; but innate vacillation swayed the balance for peace.

"It's possession of the kids," he explained grudgingly. "I've a boy and a girl, you know."

"Possession of the kids!" Tracy slapped his thigh uproariously. "That's good; mighty good! Gad, who'd have thought you a fond father like that!" He roared afresh.

Phelps coloured to the forehead, his child chin stiffened; but he held silence.

"And how's it coming out?" The mirth had subsided to a grin. "As your very good friend I'm all impatience."

"I expect to get the boy," stiffly. "My attorney says he'll know positively to-morrow—or the day after at the latest."

"By Jove," Tracy shoved his chair back explosively, "I did come just in time! A few days more and you really would have flown. You are going immediately it's settled, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Of course," with a prodigious wink, "of course. Who ever heard of a colonist—who didn't bring his incentive with him or find a new one here—waiting for the second train after his unpleasantness was adjusted? The celerity of disappearance has become proverbial."

Phelps' efforts at self-repression were becoming painful, and the other observed them gloatingly. He leaned forward, his red pitted face with the loose integument under the eyes contorted into the travesty of friendship.

"By the way, old man, we'll have to make this a red-letter day. Who knows, maybe we'll never meet again. Got anything in stock for an occasion like this, have you?" He glanced at the bottles on the table in disgust. "You know what I mean. Not pap for babies; something fit for men."

Phelps' hands went into his pockets in open, dogged rebellion.

"No. I haven't a drop."

"All right," obviously. "It won't take long to supply the deficiency. Touch the button, will you."

The red left the other's face, but he did not move.

"I requested," the voice was a bit louder than before, "that you ring, please."

"I heard you," tensely, "I'm not deaf."

Tracy leaned forward, his narrowed eyes red as twin headlights.

"Why the devil don't you do it then! Ring, I say."

"I don't choose to. Who are you to give commands, anyway?"

"Phelps——"

Both men were on their feet; but the smaller in advance, a chair between him and the aggressor, his fingers pausing over the button of the bell. They glared at each other thus; malice unconcealed on the one face, disgust and more on the other.

"Damn you, Stephen——"

"Not another word." Phelps' free hand went up compellingly; from repression his faded blue eyes burst into open flame. "I've stood the last straw from you, Norman Tracy. Another sentence and so sure as I'm standing here I'll call the police." The soft boy throat of him swelled until his collar was choking tight. "You ordered me out of your room once, you bully. It's my turn now. God knows, I'm

bad enough, human enough; but you—go. I don't wish to tell you what I think of you. Go."

"Phelps——"

"Enough, I say. I won't stand another word."

Face to face for the last time in their lives the two men, pilgrims alike from afar to a common shrine, a shrine intended for neither, perverted, but in different degrees by both, stood looking at each other. A dragging half minute they stood so, each taking the other's measure, each flaming hot with suppressed enmity. At last, against his will, for no reason he would have admitted adequate, Tracy's eyes dropped and he moved toward the door. In the silence the other had demanded, without even a parting thrust, it closed behind him.

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Mrs. Waldow herself was bustling about the cheery east room putting things to order. That something was on her mind was obvious. She dusted the well-littered reading table twice and caught herself just in time to prevent a second repetition; unfailing criterion of abstraction in one of her methodical habit. That of her own initiative the irritant would not be divulged was equally obvious from the repressed line of her thin lips. From time to time she glanced surreptitiously at the motionless figure in the big chair by the window; but she hazarded no remark. At last, her work complete, she paused; her arms akimbo, the tiny roll of hair perched on the back of her head looking like an overgrown walnut.

"Anything more I can do for you, miss?" she proffered.

"No, I think not. You brought the ice-water, didn't you?"

"Yes, miss."

"That's all then, I believe."

The landlady picked up her dusting cloth and started to leave.

"By the way,"—the girl did not look around, yet when shrewd-eyed Mrs. Waldow glanced at her she knew from the tinge of the tiny ears that the brown face was burning,—“did Mr. Tracy come home last night?”

"No, miss."

"Nor the night before?"

Mrs. Waldow hesitated uncomfortably.

"He hasn't used his room for two days now," she admitted at last.

"Not at all?" The flame had departed from the ears leaving them pink again.

The landlady hesitated longer than before, fingering the loose sleeve of her working sacque in an indecision most unusual.

"Frankly, miss," she was not looking at the questioner, and the announcement came hurriedly, as though she were in haste to have it over, "the room is vacant. Mr. Tracy moved out day before yesterday morning.

"I realise it's none of my business," the silence had lasted so long that the woman was genuinely contrite,

"and maybe I oughtn't to have told you; but"—she essayed an apologetic glance—"but it seemed to me, somehow, as though you ought to know."

"I understand. You did quite right." The voice was repressedly unemotional. "Did he happen to mention where he was moving?"

"I didn't see Mr. Tracy himself, miss. The man who came said the things were going to The Cata-ract."

Again there was silence for so long that the landlady grew uncomfortable.

"You're sure," she repeated solicitously, "that there's nothing more I can do?"

The girl still looked out of the window; across the patch of green onto the hot, dusty street.

"You might, come to think of it, bring over the little table. I'll write a few letters after a bit. Thank you. That's all. I'll ring if I need you."

Alone, suddenly as the passage of an April cloud a change swept over the dainty, repressed little woman. The lips, before so firm, twitched; the soft, oval chin trembled uncontrollably; colours like a rainbow danced before the brown eyes, blotting out the uninviting tan of the roadway. She fought at them rebelliously, with little dabs of her crumpled handkerchief; but they only gathered thicker and thicker. The patter of passing pedestrians' feet, never ceasing by day, came to her ears; but not as always before did it bear its message of human nearness, human sympathy. Instead it was but a mockery. Indifferent

absolutely these people were passing her by; everyone was passing her by. The horrible loneliness of a peniless stranger in a great city, of a traveller lost in a desert, fell upon her crushingly. The chin twitched more than before, the tears became a flood, and in an abandon of helpless, hopeless misery she rocked to and fro, to and fro; her fingers clasped white in her lap.

"Oh, what have I done," she sobbed hysterically, "what have I done; Oh! oh! oh!" repeated again and again. "Oh! oh! oh!"

A half hour passed, and the storm still raged; an hour, and from pure physical exhaustion it was still, and the girl lay back passively with closed eyes. One o'clock came—and the demure maid with lunch; but the girl sent it away untasted. The tan-coloured street was in shadow from the high cut in front of the house before she roused and, bathing her swollen face, rigidly repressing a glance into the mirror, came back and sorted out paper and pen in preparation. Then she wrote a letter, this letter:

"SIOUX FALLS, S. DAKOTA,
"August the Second.

"DEAR MUMSEY:"

Just for a second she paused; but that instant was fatal. The old childish word of endearment with its suggestion of past was too intimate, too throbbingly full of recollections. Again the rainbows danced before her eyes, and ere she was aware two great tears

spattered down, mingling in fantastic figures with the fresh ink. Very resolutely she drew back to arms' length, that it might not occur again, and took up another sheet.

"DEAR MOTHER:" (The slough was carefully avoided this time.)

"I know you think me naughty, not to have written you before; but somehow the weeks have been so full and I've been so"—the writer paused to shake her head rebelliously. The words were becoming very dim—"happy that I've neglected everyone except Norman. Besides, somehow, after the way I left I couldn't write until—you understand—until I had something definite to tell you. But it's all right now, mother dear, never fear. Norman and I were married"—again the words were dancing like bewitched things and for a whole minutes the pen was idle—"yesterday in the rector's own room at the rear of the big church. I wanted you there, wanted you so bad." No hesitation now. The pen was fairly racing across the sheet—"but Norman is so decided about some things. He wanted it so, just us two alone—and the rector, and he's been so good to me I couldn't refuse. I know you'll understand—and forgive us. We do both love you dearly, mother mine, for all we seem—peculiar." It was the bottom of the page and the slender brown fingers turned the sheet and spread it flat steadily.

"I can't write much to-day; I'm too busy. To-

morrow we leave for a long trip; I don't know how long or just when we'll be back home. Norman's business here is just finished. He's been getting a franchise or something—I don't understand the least bit these deals men rack their brains over—and it's worried him, although he wouldn't bother me with it. But now it's all over and we can leave here for good. He's like a boy to-day; you wouldn't know him. He vows he's going to forget business and everything—but me—and take a long, long rest. I'll write you again, mother dear, just as soon as I have time and tell you all about myself, about—everything.

“Meanwhile good-bye, and here's a kiss for you; a big, big one. Oh, I'm so happy, so happy!

“Your own daughter,

“EULA TRACY.

“P. S. I enclose a letter for you to mail; all stamped and addressed, so you'll only have to drop it in the box. He—you know—thinks I'm still at home, and it would be a bother to explain. Take care of it, please, like the old dear you are; and here's another kiss for you; another big, big one.

“EULA.”

The second letter, like the latter part of the first, she wrote very swiftly, very steadily, and addressed and stamped both with care. She was calm now, was Eula Felkner, calm as at that other time which seemed now so long ago, when in this same room she had looked life, and Norman Tracy, fair in the face. In

some inexplicable way a purpose, a definite purpose, had evolved from chaos, and she was no longer afraid; no, not of anything. The brown face was a shade greyish and looked pinched about the mouth, but the great child eyes peered forth candidly, tearlessly. Her work complete she rang for dinner, and when it came ate almost heartily.

"I've an errand for you, Christine." The tiny tea table had been cleared again and the silent maid had paused for any last direction. "It's this letter. Will you mail it, please?"

"Yes, miss."

"Mail it yourself—and to-night?"

"Yes, miss," repeated.

"Thank you, Christine." A sorry little smile flashed for an instant into the maid's wondering eyes. "That's all, and as you go down tell Mrs. Waldow, please, I wish to speak with her a moment."

Very shortly the landlady appeared. She was in the glove-tight pale green waist again, and the walnut-like knot of hair had expanded miraculously. She paused just inside the door in obvious uncertainty. For a moment the other did not speak and the newcomer shifted from foot to foot awkwardly.

"Won't you have a light, miss?" The room was falling into shadow and she grasped at the straw. "It's getting dark earlier already."

"No, not yet." The girl roused with an effort. "Sit down, please; over here. I wish to talk with you."

The other complied docilely; so completely so that anyone knowing the usually impassive, worldly-hard landlady would have looked twice to convince themselves this was the same person.

"I sent for you, Mrs. Waldow," the girl looked the older woman fair in the eyes unfalteringly, "because I feel it's no more than your due to understand all about me, about—everything. You've been very good to me since I've been here, Mrs. Waldow."

"Don't speak of it, miss." One work-worn hand made a clumsy gesture of deprecation. "I've only done what I was paid to do, what any other landlady would have done."

"Perhaps," equivocally, "but I'm grateful just the same. I haven't treated you at all nicely, either; I realise that. I"—she paused before casting her thunderbolt—"I lied to you when I first came, Mrs. Waldow."

To her surprise the other showed none. Obviously she had not understood.

"My name isn't Eula Tracy at all," hurriedly, "and Norman Tracy is no relation of mine whatever. I was just his—his——" She halted; against her will and despite the friendly darkness the flame was again burning on her face. Certainly it was clear enough now.

"Yes, miss," soothingly, but still with no curiosity. "I understood that."

"You—knew and never said anything?" It was

the alien's wonder again at the tolerance, the indifference of this people. "Knew all the time?"

The older woman looked away—and not to smile. Beneath her impassive mask at that moment she had the feeling which prompts murder.

"My business is not to meddle with other people's affairs, miss."

The red left the girl's face, the drawn look reappeared about the mouth.

"My real name," she reverted to the dropped subject relentlessly, meaningly, "is Marie Belmont."

"Yes, miss."

The girl hesitated. She had a mind to repeat it again to make sure the other understood, would not forget; but perforce she was satisfied. To do so would be too significant. Instead she looked at her companion timidly, almost appealingly.

"This brings me to the other matter I wished to speak about. Now that you know how—bad I am, maybe you'd rather I wouldn't stay with you any longer. If so I'll——"

"Don't, please, miss."

"I'll," the girl was merciless in her self-chastisement, "move away."

The older woman passed her hands across her eyes, but it was so dark now that one could not tell the cause.

"You mustn't think of going, Miss—Miss Belmont. I wish you to stay so long as you care to."

"Thank you so much." The girl leaned forward gratefully. "I won't—bother you long though, anyway. A—month or so is all," with elaborate indefiniteness.

There was no response, and of a sudden another thought came into the girl's mind.

"I nearly forgot about the—rent," she suggested anxiously. "If it's due I——"

"Miss Belmont——" No mistaking the hurt in the voice this time.

"Pardon me," hastily. "I—wished you to understand, was all." She choked a little and paused to swallow at the lump which all at once had returned to her throat. "You're so good to me. I don't know how you can be when I've—I've lied to you the way I have; when I'm so bad." Once more she paused, swallowing hard.

Mrs. Waldow's lips parted—but no words came. She cleared her throat instead noisily, and lapsed into silence.

"That's all, I believe." The girl's voice had become dull again and she leaned back wearily. "I don't wish to keep you up here away from your work any longer." For an instant and despite the shadow the same sorry little smile which had set the maid a-wondering flashed in reappearance. "Thank you once more for—for your kindness."

A moment there was silence, silence absolute; then, interrupting, transpired the unexpected. The room was now almost dark, and of a sudden rising, the

landlady made her way forward gropingly until she stood fair above the shadowy, passive figure in the big chair. An instant she hesitated so; then precipitately, clumsily she bent over and touched her lips swiftly once, twice to the round, smooth cheek. Before the other could speak, in utter stampede at her own revelation, she fled awkwardly from the room; her great ungainly bulk colliding noisily with every object in her path.

Chapter XV

THE IRONY OF AGE

"COME right in." Mrs. Clayton, amply built, motherly from crown to heel, opened the door wide and seized the visitor's hand with a grip of genuine friendship. "You must be terribly hot. I hated awfully to ask you out in a day like this—and in the worst of it too."

"Out!" The big voice laughed cheerily. "I haven't been in yet since night before last." The speaker was following her into the cool, darkened library. "This is the worst spell of heat I've known since I came here;" he looked at his companion slyly, "twenty-six years——"

"Twenty-five. You and Anna came the year after Horace and me."

"That's right." The man corrected himself with swift humility, and they both smiled as though the same bit of repartee had not been gone through with uncounted times before. "It is twenty-five years, come to think of it; but anyway, this is the hottest yet." He had opened a side door half concealed in the big desk as though thoroughly familiar with his bearings. "Last summer was the nearest approach, and the season before that the nearest previously." He grinned at his own joke. "Pardon me, I don't

do this very often, Margaret"; he had poured full a tiny decanter and drank it standing; "but frankly I'm about beat. Seems as though every patient I ever had—now living"—in characteristically whimsical qualification—"are all down together." He threw himself into a big chair with a sigh of satisfaction and his round face with its grizzly, closely cropped beard resumed its normal smile. "What's wrong, Margaret?"

Mrs. Clayton observed him understandingly, sympathetically.

"The trouble's with Horace, and is the same as your own. He was up all last night too; and when he came home this noon the driver had to help him into the house." The faded grey eyes moistened in spite of rigorous effort to remain composed. "You men, you old men," she emphasised deliberately, "are sheer foolish to continue the way you're doing. I'm ashamed of you both; at your age not to know better than to kill yourselves!"

"Humph!" Ordinarily the reference to age would have evoked a fresh flow of well-tested repartee, but now the big man only tapped the chair arm with his knuckles meditatively. "Humph!" he repeated. "Where is Horace now; back to the office?"

"No, I wouldn't let him leave. He's upstairs lying down instead." The maternal cropped out as unmistakably as in a mother hen with a weakly chick. "Someone's got to look after him."

"That's right," approvingly. "You did just what I'd have done—if I could. I'll go right up and see him."

"Not just yet, please." Mrs. Clayton held up a detaining finger. "We must speak lower too," modulating her own voice in conformity, "or he'll be down here on us unexpected; and first I wish to talk with you a bit alone. That's why I sent for you." She leaned forward earnestly with the instinctive dependence of old friendship. "John, between us we've got to make him go away for a while; go clear away without anyone knowing where and without his patients even knowing he's going until he's gone. They'll never let him leave otherwise; and—he's simply got to have a rest. You understand. He'll never hold up a week longer with things as they are."

For answer Ingley merely screwed up one side of his face; but his meaning was obvious.

"I know you think he won't consent, but I tell you he's simply got to." Again she leaned toward her companion with the old motion of confidence implicit. "You're the only person in the world, John, who can make him listen to reason. Promise him you'll take care of his practice," in the selfishness of affection she was totally oblivious of the favour she was asking, "promise him anything. I'll have our baggage all ready and we'll get away on the night train; before he has time to change his mind. He'll go, John, if you say he must."

Again the big doctor's comic-actor face twisted

in a grimace; but motherly Mrs. Clayton never dreamed of the effort it cost. She had never felt the dead weariness which is physical torture supreme.

"Very well," Ingley arose at last with an effort and drew a flaming red handkerchief over his forehead absently, "I'll do what I can." He started toward the stair heavily. "Be all ready. I think maybe I can convince him."

"John," the old lady hurried ungracefully across the room to grasp his hand, "I won't try to thank you." The dim grey eyes were moist again. "You know how Annie would feel if it were you."

"Yes." As wind lifts a fog the man's irritation of a moment ago vanished. Instinctively, from the fulness of knowledge, the woman had selected the one adequate suggestion. "Yes, I understand, Margaret. I—understand."

.

"So that's all you've got to do!" The white-bearded old man stretched out on the lounge before the open window was wide-eyed, and the visitor lumbered across the room brusquely. "What d'ye call this sort of laziness anyway; your *siesta*?"

"All I've got to do!" Horace Clayton sniffed audibly. "If I were like some young practitioners I could name," he inspected the newcomer from head to shoe sarcastically, "with time to waste making social calls during office hours I wouldn't be where I am now. No, sir, this is not a *siesta*."

"I see." The big bandanna handkerchief came

into requisition again. "You don't dignify it by that name yet. It's merely a nap." The one chair in the room squeaked protestingly as it felt the speaker's weight. "To get down to business, I just dropped in to see if you can't take care of a little of my extra work, seeing it's a dull time with you." He removed his big steel-bowed spectacles and polished the lenses deliberately. "I've got to turn it over to somebody, and I'd as lief you had the benefit as anyone."

"Take care of your overflow?" The wrinkles of the invalid's old face fairly ground on each other in excess of irony. "Certainly. Your whole practice just as easily if you wish. I'd never notice the difference. Lock up any time you see fit and tack a notice on the door telling people where to come. I'll do the rest."

As deliberately as they had been cleaned the visitor returned the glasses to his nose and hitched his chair up close to the lounge. Slowly, at first softly like the distant approach of an express train, augmenting moment by moment until it was a roar, his face meantime broadening sympathetically, Ingley laughed; and after a moment a minor chord, all but drowned by the major, showed that the other had joined in. Following for a minute or more there was silence while the two old friends, their tribute to precedent paid, looked at each other in near-sighted understanding. Then Ingley leaned forward, a massive elbow on a massive knee.

"About to the end of your tether for the present,

aren't you, Horace?" he sympathised. "The way this spell of heat lasts is a record-breaker. I never before saw so many people down all at once, did you?"

"No." A pillow was propped under the white head irritably. "Nor such an epidemic of infants. The town will double population this year if the present rate holds out."

The other chuckled.

"No wind so ill, you know," he suggested. "It'll be good for real estate—sometime."

"Real estate be hanged!" The white whiskers fairly bristled. "Mine now is worth more than I can ever make use of. You and I are too near cemetery hill to care for future advances, John."

Ingley hitched still closer appreciatively.

"At last you're talking sense," he corroborated. "That's just what I came up here to speak about. You've got to quit, if not for good at least for a while." The accompanying look was big with meaning. "The time for indefinite promises is past. You've got to go now."

Clayton propped himself higher and looked at the speaker suspiciously.

"Who put that notion into your head, John? Has Margaret been talking to you?"

"Margaret nothing," lied Ingley calmly. "Haven't I eyes in my head and can't I reason out anything when I find you're not at the office, but home instead in your present shape? You must think I've gone daft rapidly. I tell you there's no alterna-

tive. It's the hill, unless you go. There's no use in pretence."

Clayton changed position restlessly.

"I know, John," he admitted, "and understand you mean it kindly. I'm going to quit soon, you know I am—we've talked that over before—but just now it's impossible, simply impossible."

"Impossible," shortly. "Why? Haven't you the ready money? If not I'll lend you——"

Clayton sniffed disgustedly.

"Afraid then the sheriff will meet you at the train?"

"Ingley, you're exasperating as the devil sometimes."

"Well, answer me then. Why is it impossible?"

This time the elder man sat up, and the contrast between him and the visitor augmented. As years had added weight to the one they had taken it from the other. Sitting there, Horace Clayton, with his white crown and whiter, clipped beard, appeared all head and nerves. Every other element seemed metamorphosed in the development.

"Don't talk nonsense," he protested pettishly. "It'd be easier for me to squeeze into Paradise than to leave here just now."

It was a rare opportunity indeed, but Ingley held himself rigidly in check. The time for banter had passed.

"But why?" he repeated stubbornly. "You haven't given me a single reason yet."

"Ingley," Clayton scrutinised the other with almost a doubt. "I never—thought you'd lose your mind completely. Isn't it enough that I've got three patients actually in danger and twice as many more who fancy they are; to say nothing of the other cases I mentioned in waiting and invariably calling just at the hour one can't well go? If that isn't sufficient reason I don't know what on earth is."

Ingley's great jaw settled, folding over the supporting hand.

"There are some thirty-odd other doctors listed in the directory. Among them they ought to be able to straighten out the difficulty."

Clayton did not deign a reply, and Ingley observed him immovably.

"You forget, Horace, that this isn't a case of choice. You've absolutely got to leave. These people will dog you to death if you're within their reach. Listen to reason. They'll all find someone else when you're gone."

"John," the elder man repressed himself with an effort, "I can't believe it's you advising—this thing. It's not like you. Are you joking?"

"No, emphatically not. I meant every word I said."

For a moment the other looked at him dumbly; then like a birthmark the red sprang out above the white beard line.

"John Ingley," he blazed, "if you were any other man on earth I'd order you out of the house." He

paused for breath. "Can't you realise that some of these people are as old as you and I; that I've attended them every time they've been sick for the last twenty years; that some others I helped bring into the world, and that they trust me like their own father? To leave them now when they need me most would be like deserting—Margaret. You're mad, man. Stark mad."

Ingley's massive jowl sank lower and lower.

"Would it help matters any for you—or them—if you were—dead?"

The red left the other's wrinkled face as suddenly as it had come, leaving it whiter than before.

"This from you is—unkind, John." He halted, weakly, defencelessly. "Cruelly unkind!"

Again Ingley held himself composed with an effort.

"Perhaps." He looked the other fixedly. "Nevertheless, what I tell you is true. You can't go on with your work if you want to. You couldn't get down to the office alone to save your life. Try it, if you don't believe me."

Again above the white beard line the hot blood lifted at the challenge.

"Very well. To convince you, we'll see." Clayton stood up bravely and pulled down his waistcoat. "Are you going along with me?" He was always very careful about his personal appearance, and, stepping over to a mirror, he passed a comb through his thin beard. His tie was likewise askew and he attempted to straighten it; but somehow it wouldn't

knot correctly. He tried again—and to his surprise it had all but faded from view. The whole room looked queer and darkened. Involuntarily he went staggering to the window to raise the shade. The curtain went up with a snap, he heard it—and it was no lighter! A moment longer, in the fulness of understanding, he stood there, battling against the inevitable; then weakly, stumbly he dropped back on the lounge. A full minute he lay there, breathing hard; then in utter rout he turned facing the other directly.

“You’re right, John,” he admitted. “I’m at the end of my tether. I’m—beat.”

Ingle said nothing. The leaven was working.

“I’ve looked forward a long time to—a moment like this.” Clayton passed his hand over his forehead and it came back damp. “I’ve seen it was coming, but”—haltingly—“but I never fancied anything as bitter as the reality.” He looked at the big man fixedly, with a new intimacy—the instinctive comradeship of age. “We’re old men, John. We’re not going to be, we are. It’s—ghastly, isn’t it? Ghastly!”

Ingle’s free hand made a motion of deprecation.

“Let’s not think of it,” he evaded quickly. “It’s useless.”

But the other was down and he acknowledged the fact.

“I can’t help it; and the worst is that all I can see is the injustice, the damnable injustice!” His

old eyes blazed. "Here we've worked a lifetime to build up a practice, worked day and night, in all seasons and all kinds of weather; and now that we've succeeded the thing we've builded turns on us and grinds us down, down, without mercy!" He halted and gradually the blaze died in reminiscence. "It's like the snowballs we started on the hills when we were boys. We rolled and rolled until they were big enough to move of themselves. Then we got below and held them back until somehow we lost our footing and—you remember what they did then—they went right over us and away while we lay sprawling and digging the snow out of our eyes. We didn't learn anything from that lesson did we, John?"

"No, we never learn much from lessons in this life."

They were silent for a long time. The hot afternoon sun moved farther to the west; peered in on them smilingly. Ingley arose and drew the shade. His old brusqueness returned.

"This sort of thing is childish, worse than childish," he announced gruffly. "The thing to do is not to rebel, but to accept the inevitable and make the best of it. Nature won't make an exception to her scheme for our particular benefit, that's certain." He sat down again heavily. "To return from where we strayed; you're ready to go?"

Clayton writhed—but he was beaten.

"Yes."

"And your work?"

"I haven't considered that—yet." He looked at the big man hopelessly, almost appealingly. "I'll have to get some young man to take charge of it, I suppose."

Ingley hesitated. He was tempted.

"Nonsense!" His manner was exaggeratedly gruff again. "I'll take care of things myself; your old patients, anyway. I may have to get help with the others. Have you the calls with you?"

"John," Clayton was sitting up again, his eyes very bright, "I know what this means to you now. I can't permit——"

"Oh, pshaw!" Ingley cut him off peremptorily. "You'd do as much for me if positions were reversed. Get out your list and explain things a bit."

Again Clayton hesitated, he was not deceived; but human nature is weak and he fell.

"I won't try to thank you, Ingley," he halted, "but you know what this means to me." He produced his memorandum almost guiltily and for ten minutes went from name to name; explaining, commenting, suggesting. At last he paused.

"And the other list," assisted Ingley; "the one of—prospective arrivals."

Clayton opened the book again.

"There's but one case liable to call you at any hour now. It's of a lady down on South Phillips Avenue. The name she gave was Belmont, Marie Belmont; and the number's here." He hesitated thoughtfully. "Between you and me I don't be-

lieve everything is just right; but I suppose that's none of the doctor's business."

Ingley thrust the memoranda into his pocket.

"Yes, you're right; that's none of the doctor's business. We're supposed to correct other people's mistakes; not sermonise upon them." He arose and stood looking down at the other almost affectionately.

"That's all, I guess, for the present. I'll speak to Margaret as I go out and have things all ready." He started for the door. "I'll be down to the train to see that you don't back out."

Clayton looked at the broad departing back; and saw it but dimly. A multitude of things he wished to say, an avalanche of gratitude tugged at his tongue; but somehow he had no words to express either. He dropped back to the pillows weakly.

"God bless you, John Ingley," he voiced. "God bless you!"

And, agnostics both, the other understood.

Chapter XVI

A BREATH OF THE WILD

JOHN INGLEY dropped into the most convenient of Watson's cane-seated chairs and sat for a full minute speechless, puffing like a badly overworked tug.

"In Heaven's name, man," he queried at last between breaths, "how do you get up here? Do you fly?"

The long host observed his visitor, smilingly, analytically.

"No," he explained. "The solution is far simpler. I avoid the mistake of being down—at this time of morning."

"I see. A most commendable practice." Ingley consulted his watch equivocally. "I didn't realise it was after twelve. But how about your night calls?"

"We were speaking of realities, not of possibilities, Doctor."

"Yes, yes; that's true." Ingley knit his brows meditatively, but meanwhile the keen eyes behind the great steel-bowed glasses were taking in every detail of the unprosperous-looking office. His inspection complete, his glance halted at the still smiling figure in the desk chair. "Doubtless you'd like the possibility suggested to be a reality, however?"

"A time existed when I should."

Ingley was oblivious of the mood and tense. He was thinking of other things.

"Do you know why I strained my lungs climbing these six flights of stairs?" he digressed suddenly.

"I'm compelled to admit I do not, Doctor."

"I thought so." The big man mopped his face deliberately with the red bandanna. "It's because I've met you some half dozen times at society meetings and places of that kind and still you pass me on the street without being conscious of my identity."

Watson waited in characteristic silence.

"A person so unsocial or abstracted as that hadn't ought to leak the confidence of another man's practice."

Still Watson held his peace and still Ingley observed him under knitted brows.

"You know Clayton, Horace Clayton, I suppose?" he queried directly.

"Yes."

"I just helped ship him away for a rest, for I don't know how long. He's worn down thinner than an old scalpel."

"Yes," politely.

"Someone's got to take care of his practice while he's gone. I agreed to be responsible, but I can't attend to it all."

"Yes," once more.

Ingley mopped his forehead afresh. Unusual in

that land of cool nights, it was still almost as hot as day.

"I've sent word to his oldest patients, the ones he was most sensitive about leaving; but there are others liable to call him at any minute." The visitor thrust the bandanna back into his pocket with an air of relief that explanations were so nearly complete. "You know where he lives, don't you?"

"I'm compelled again to admit my ignorance, Doctor."

"Well, no matter. Any hackman will take you there." The big man fumbled in his trousers' pocket and produced a couple of keys. "The small one's to Clayton's office, the other to the rear door of the house." He laid them side by side on the table deliberately. "In the hurry they couldn't find any to the front door." He arose laboriously and transferred his hat from his knee to his head. "If I were you I'd go right up there now. There's a 'phone at the head of his bed. You'll find the room easily; second floor, west wing. If there's anything else you wish to know call around at the office to-morrow. I'm"—he steadied himself for an instant with a great hairy hand on the table top—"I'm about to the end of my own rope to-night."

Watson looked from the visitor to the keys he had deposited so arbitrarily, and back again impassively.

"Just one thing you neglected." He checked himself suddenly. The weariness of the big, shapeless

figure was very apparent. "I'm sorry, Doctor," he substituted, "but you haven't given me a chance before to speak. I can't do what you suggest."

The other faced about absently.

"I—beg your pardon?"

Watson repeated his statement without comment.

"You—refuse?" For a moment Ingley observed the speaker blankly, unbelievably. Obviously such possibility had never occurred to him. Then of a sudden the bushy brows contracted in unconcealed irritation. "You must be daft, man," he exploded. "It's the chance of your life. Clayton's got the largest practice in the State, and, between you and me, he's as liable as not never to make another call. You can drop right into his shoes if you show yourself fit." He sat down again clumsily. "I'd have given my last copper for this opportunity when I was your age."

"I understand, Doctor." Watson had leaned back, his eyes half closed, and sat looking past his visitor at the cheaply papered wall behind, "and—thank you sincerely for your kindness. There was a time when I too would have bartered with Providence for this opening; but now"—he halted. Confidence did not come easily from this man—"but just now it's—impossible."

One of Ingley's great hands was tapping on the edge of his chair seat; as it had tapped in Horace Clayton's bedroom.

"Would you mind telling me why, Doctor Wat-

son? I'm an old man and—crabbed when I'm tired; but I'd be glad to do you a good turn if I can."

The broadly candid eyes shifted to the other's face, held there.

"I believe you, Doctor—— It's because I'm going away. I should have been gone now but the party who's to take my few belongings was delayed in coming. He'll be here to-morrow, though, sure or—I'll go anyway."

The tapping ceased.

"You—fancy there are other openings more promising more than the one I suggested?"

"No, it's not that." Another halt and another struggle with innate reticence. "I'm quitting the town, quitting the profession for good. I never expect to make another call, Doctor."

Unconsciously the tap, tap, tap of the great hairy hand was resumed.

"It's difficult for me to understand. You're going into some other line of work?"

"After a time, yes. Meanwhile——" The voice was silent.

Ingley waited; but nothing came.

"Pardon me, but"—the bluff old doctor was almost diffident—"but I wish to be of service if I can. You must have a very good reason for the change?"

Watson got out his pipe and lit it absently.

"To you it wouldn't seem adequate in the least. To me——" The great bushy head made a gesture of deprecation. "It's useless to explain."

Ingley's keen old eyes caught the motion; his keener old brain understood.

"Yes, I agree it's useless. There's but one incentive capable of inducing a man to do what you intend: a woman—lost or gained."

Across the narrow table the two men looked at each other fair; the elder kindly tolerant, the younger as ever—inscrutable. A long time they sat so; until the tobacco in the pipe burned to ashes and went dead.

"Yes, you're right—and wrong." Watson replenished the bowl and lit it afresh. "I don't mind telling you now." He looked at the other meaningly, frankly. With the incredible swiftness two human beings will sometimes touch they had in those last few minutes become almost as father and son. "It was a woman, the necessity of keeping her in civilisation, which made me what I am now; but it's not a woman who's taking me back; back where I began." He halted as though that were all there was to tell.

"What is it then?" not insistently or curiously; but as in the silence of a sick room big Ingley would have asked concerning a patient's ill. "I'm your friend, I trust."

"Yes." Watson puffed again and again until the ashes glowed and the smoke lifted as a cloud. "Yes; but it's hard to explain; impossible almost." For a second the wrinkles clustered about his eyes. "It's the voice of ancestors I don't know even by name calling me—back."

Ingley made no comment. He knew it was unnecessary now.

Watson smoked a moment longer; then, clattering amid a shower of sparks the pipe went to the table and the long figure straightened; straightened out of its last trace of emotionless passivity. Of a sudden the man was as a captured wild thing scenting its own.

"I'm," he looked his companion fixedly, almost without the waver of an eyelash, "what every man is, Doctor; product of heredity and environment. My great-grandfather was an adventurer; my grandfather a trapper; my father a cattleman. On the female side God only knows my pedigree; but it's wild as the frontier itself. My father was married—they tell me; the others were not. I myself was born on the prairie—somewhere, an infinity from nowhere; and thereafter until I can remember the record is blank." A restless sinewy hand combed once through the speaker's mane and returned to his lap; but his eyes never shifted. "After that until I was twenty it was almost as bare. I did what every other human being thereabouts of my age and sex did; worked, hated, dissipated—went the frontier gamut. How I broke away then, why I wished to see the other side of life, the evolved side, I leave to someone else to explain, I can't; but I did. That I would be away ten years, though, as I have, I had no more idea then than that I would visit Mars. That's where environment and—woman comes in, Doctor."

"Yes," appreciatively, for the narrative had halted.

"Those last years," for the first time the blue eyes shifted, "it's needless to detail—you understand by intuition. Through them all I was the same; through all flowed the blood of my ancestors; it had merely collided with something else stronger. It was a fight daily, hourly; but against the field one instinct won. During the years I worked my way through preparatory school and college it won. While I was out in a God-deserted little town it won. After I came here for a little time it still won; then—then—— It was not the instinct that failed even then, Doctor—not the instinct."

"I see." In the impotency of language big Ingley could find nothing else to say. "I see."

For the second time Watson's eyes came back. For the second time every muscle went taut.

"You know now, Doctor, as nearly as any human being can make another understand, why I'm going, why it's inevitable. No other incentive on God's earth: pleasure, celebrity, wealth, can hold me back. The wild is in my blood, bred there, ineradicable. I'm like a house-dog in the fall when the first touch of frost is in the air and the moon is full. He doesn't know why he barks all the night long, but I do. I too then want to howl, like an Indian, like a drunken cowboy; and I know the reason." Taciturn by nature and by habit, for the one time in his life he had ever made a human being confidant—like a prairie stream in springtime roaring, irresistible for a day

and a night with flood water, and then again silent—Watson rushed on: “I’ve scarcely left the office this summer; the limits of the town not at all. I didn’t dare to. If I’d ever gotten away from things which made me remember, ever caught the real prairie scent in my nose, I’d have gone. A regiment couldn’t have held me. I know I’m a child, Doctor, a savage; but I am as I am. Even if I stayed I’d be a failure now; a hopeless, inexcusable failure. I’m impossible wholly. You may as well give me up.”

Ingley’s great jowl had settled lower and lower, until his chin was concealed. Now it lifted.

“I never give up—until death. It’s my one creed. Besides, you’re too good to lose.” The remark was as candidly impersonal as the reading of a newspaper headline. “I’ve had my eye on you for a long time and, frankly, I like you. I don’t know why, but I like you. I’ve known Clayton was going to drop, and drop all of a sudden; and I had you in mind as his successor all the while. It’s”—he screwed up his face indescribably—“it’s rank nonsense for you to talk of leaving now. I refuse to even consider it.”

As he had anticipated, there was no answer; but the pause gave him chance to think, to summon up fresh logic.

“I”—he did not attempt to look the other fair, he knew he could not—“I realise the feeling you—described, the call of heredity, of—isolation; but we must all of necessity deny ourselves something. We

owe it to our fellow men. There are multitudes who can do the work you did in the frontier country; but here—we need you, that's all."

"I scarcely hoped you'd understand, Doctor." Watson was smoking again, deliberately, impassively. "It's not to be expected."

"Besides," Ingley ignored the suggestion obviously, "we're living in a practical generation. An established income isn't to be despised. We can sentimentalise all we wish; but a time's coming, and coming mighty fast—we old fellows realise that—when age stares us in the face and then—— Sentiment doesn't buy comforts then."

Again the big man paused; and again he could not look the other fair. He began to feel warm and he loosed the buttons of his vest clumsily.

"I suppose for a time," he stumbled on, "you'd find it hard to stay. Probably you'd have to cut loose now and then, give yourself lots of tether; but later——"

"Doctor——"

The big man halted; but he still looked away.

"Doctor Ingley——"

It was impossible to feign misunderstanding this time. The gaze shifted reluctantly.

"Don't do it." Watson had leaned far forward and he was smiling, actually smiling, fair into his companion's eyes. "Nature didn't fashion you for dissimulation. You're as transparent as thin ice."

For a second longer Ingley struggled to maintain

the masquerade; then of a sudden his great bulk went lax in the reaction of utter weariness.

"Yes," he admitted monotonously, "it's useless; I knew that all the time. I—understand." For no apparent reason he passed his hand slowly across his mouth. "I'm a fool; an old fool; and selfish in the matter absolutely. I wished you to stay for Clayton, but I wanted you more on my own account. I'm about—finished myself, and I've been looking for someone, a young man, to take my place." Again the unconscious, useless motion. "I'd have spoken before, but I was so egotistically cock sure you'd jump at the chance that there seemed no hurry. Some day when you too are beaten, you'll understand how hard it is to find someone to take your place." He recalled himself suddenly. "No, you'll never understand now. But it's a disappointment. I don't know where else to turn."

Long before the smile had left Watson's face and, his eyes half closed, he too leaned back, motionless. When the other had completed he still did not stir; only waited.

For a long time, for longer than abstracted Ingley realised, they sat so; the stillness absolute of early morning upon the building, upon all the world surrounding. Then again the big man roused, looked squarely into those other shaded, inscrutable eyes. No need of dissimulation now.

"Doctor Watson," he had grown almost formal, "I shan't try to influence you again. I understand

that of necessity every man knows himself best; what he can do and what he cannot. I admit again that my other reasons for your staying were—what I said; that I wouldn't consider them myself. Go if you see fit, and with my best wishes; but"—the formality left the voice, the apology as well—"but there's another reason I didn't give. I'm an old man and you're a young one. You think now you've lived the cycle, that there's nothing in life but nature left. I've known human beings before who felt the same way and—I've watched them change. I repeat, I'm an old man and I've practised medicine for twenty-five years. I've had my full share of confessions and confidences. If he knows nothing else on earth, an old doctor knows human nature; better than a lawyer, better even than a priest." Ingley had forgotten that it was far toward morning, forgotten that he was very, very tired. Beneath the unkempt brows his eyes met the other's steadily, almost challengingly. "Knows human nature, I say; and human nature's the same the world over. You may fancy you're the exception; but you're not. There are no exceptions. Fundamentally you and I and the billion others are stamped from the same die; and the foundation upon which that pattern rests, has always rested and will continue so to do while life exists, is sex. Any young man who has lived ten years more or less in contact with women, who has experienced—what you admit you have known—and still fancies he can turn primitive for the remainder of his life,

is bound to be disillusioned. It's as inevitable as summer and winter; as inevitable as death."

The big man paused for a refutation; but there was none and in pure abstraction he drew the great steel-bowed spectacles from his nose and polished the lenses fumblingly.

"As inevitable as death," he repeated. "You'd be back here, or to some other city, in my lifetime."

The pipe left Watson's lips.

"Back," the query was unemotional as the half-closed eyes, "for the sake of woman in the abstract?"

"No." The spectacles went to the light for inspection, returned to their places. "Back for the sake of some other woman you already knew; whom you know now."

There was no response and Ingley shifted nearer the table.

"With you at present one instinct shadows all life; but another has proven itself bigger once and it will again. You're not sixty, as I am, but thirty; and there's a long time between to think. If you were your father or your grandfather you might never return, you might adapt yourself to the surroundings, do as they did; but you're not. You're yourself and evolved beyond their conception. You couldn't revert if you would. You'd run against a wall higher than heredity itself. I repeat, I'll see you back in my lifetime."

Again there was silence for so long that at last Ingley remembered and he drew out his watch for the

second time clumsily. For a moment he looked at it enigmatically, then his face screwed itself into a grimace of disgust.

"I knew I was becoming senile, but I didn't realise the extent. It's nearly four o'clock." He arose with an effort and put on his hat. "I'm going home."

"Just a moment, please." Watson too had risen and stood very straight with folded arms beside his chair. The childishly frank eyes had opened wide now, but the long, clean-shaven mask was impenetrable as before. "You were born in a city, always lived in cities large or small, I believe, Doctor?"

"Yes."

"You come, I've heard, of a long line of professional men, urban men; your father was a physician, your grandfather another?"

"Yes," again.

"And you've never known personally, even for a year, the reverse—the real prairies, the foothills, the bad lands, the smell of gama grass?"

"No; I've been very busy."

"Nor," insistently, "ever felt the slightest desire to do so?"

"No," again, reluctantly.

There was a halt while the two men looked at each other; a silence which by its adequacy made mere words seem trite and peurile.

"That's all." The long figure went lax once more. The blue eyes smiled. "You're not going home to-

night, though, by the way. You're to sleep right here."

For a moment Ingley hesitated in complex silence; but at last he glanced about the place significantly.

"Here?"

"Yes. I'll show you."

As once before the pantasote lounge underwent transformation into a visitor's bed—and again the appeal of the clean white linen was irresistible.

"And—you?"

The host could not but have remembered the identical repetition; but he gave no sign.

"Don't worry about me. My practice hasn't been exacting in the least to-day."

From the speaker Ingley's eyes returned to the bed, and wandered back again. The two keys, the latch and the Yale, were still upon the table, and on the way he encountered them. Like the whiteness of the sheets themselves their appeal was not to be resisted.

"You," he did not look up, "refuse then absolutely to do what I called to ask, Doctor?"

The smile left Watson's eyes and for an instant in its place stood revealed another expression: a look of hopeless, wordless isolation no other human being had ever seen; then swift as the changing colours in a kaleidoscope they were childishy impenetrable once more.

"Refuse," pressed Ingley hurriedly, "to stay even until Clayton returns?"

For a dragging minute wherein the questioner expected anything there was no response; then slowly Watson came forward until he stood facing the opposite side of the littered table.

"Doctor," the steady gaze held the other gravely, relentlessly, "do you really wish, wish very much, that I should stay?"

"Yes. I—like you, Bruce Watson." It was the man's supreme tribute, his last appeal. "I wish very, very much that you wouldn't go."

Again seconds passed, gathered into a minute, doddered on into another.

"Very well." Watson drew up the desk chair dispassionately, and sitting down filled the rank pipe afresh. "I'll take possession of Clayton's house and office in the morning." He struck a match and for a moment the flame lit up his face; but it revealed nothing. "This much I'll promise you; but whether I'll stay a day or a week or a year I can't promise." He glanced up through a haze of smoke. "Do you wish me to accept on these terms, Doctor?"

For a moment Ingley returned the glance; then almost exultingly he turned to the lounge and began to disrobe.

"Yes," he said.

Chapter XVII

THE CRISIS

IT was raining with the perpendicular soaking down-pour succeeding a violent thunder shower in sultry August as Watson climbed the long flight of slippery steps leading up the terrace; and as after a tap on the door he stood waiting the water flowed from his coat in veritable streams. The duration of the night schedule for light in the residence section was long past, and all surrounding the darkness was as the depths of a cave.

There was no immediate answer, and after a moment the caller tapped again more insistently. That this was the right number he had no certainty. He had found the correct block and chosen the one house with a night lamp burning; but until as a last resort he avoided the alarum of the bell. He had the physician instinct, this man.

At last there was a response. Of a sudden a light appeared in the vestibule and, in silhouette, a face, a woman's face unmistakably, approached the glass.

"Who's there?" queried a suppressed voice.

"The doctor. Don't waste time, please."

A key turned gratingly in the lock and as the newcomer entered the woman, Mrs. Waldow, stood facing him squarely; but nevertheless uncertainly.

"Your name, please, is——"

"Watson," the man was removing his wet clothes swiftly, "Bruce Watson."

"And Doctor Clayton, you say, is out of town?"

"Yes, away indefinitely. I'm taking care of his practice." The speaker took up his case and moved into the hallway meaningly. "I'm ready."

"I see." The woman took a step forward and halted, her work-stiffened hands fumbling at the throat of her loose sacque nervously. Usually so matter-of-fact, her face was all indecision. "I see; but I promised her—— Oh, I don't know what to do!"

Watson turned about sharply.

"Promised her what? I repeat, we're losing valuable time."

"That I'd call no one but Clayton. She made me swear to it. She had a list of all the doctors in town, and—and——"

"But you can't get Clayton; isn't that plain? You're not at fault. She's got to have someone." In the man's brief practice he had observed enough human vagaries to render the present nothing unusual. "Brace up. The world isn't coming to an end. Incidents like the present have occurred some few billions of times before. Come, please."

"Yes, but——"

"I understand," decisively, "and so will she. I'll take all the responsibility." He seized her by the arm, not unkindly, but nevertheless conclusively. "Come, or I'll be compelled to find my way alone."

At last, still reluctantly, the landlady yielded, and, Watson following, led the way up the stair. At the landing she again paused; but one look from the man behind sent her on afresh and with a hand that shook obviously she opened the door at the end of the corridor and stepped inside.

"The—doctor, miss," she halted.

The room was in almost complete shadow, so complete that when Watson entered he could barely discern the few articles of furniture and the suggested whiteness of a bed in the corner. Swiftly, noiselessly as was his wont he came across and adjusted the stop-cock of the Welsbach globe carefully. From shadow the place passed into half light, and beneath the reflector itself his own face stood clear as day. As it did so of a sudden, startlingly unexpected as a thunder clap from a cloudless sky, incoherent, choking, there sounded a cry, and another; then again returned silence absolute save for the steady patter of rain without.

Swift as instinct Watson turned, strode halfway to the bed; then with like suddenness incredible he too halted, gazing down at the white face with the wide-open eyes staring forth from the pillow fixedly; motionless as a model in clay. A second he stood so, and another; then a hand, a trembling hand, plucked at his sleeve.

"Leave her, Doctor," the landlady was sobbing hysterically. "In God's name leave her. I——"

The man roused. With one motion he had the

woman by the shoulders and by pure force was leading, carrying her from the room. In the corridor he halted and faced her about squarely.

"Heat some water quick and call a nurse;" he thrust a list of names into her hand, "any one of these." The wide blue eyes held her own compellingly, with a dominance she could no more have resisted than she could have stopped the action of her own heart. "But leave the water in the hall; don't come into the room again. You understand; don't come in, no matter what you hear." For another fraction of a second he paused in meaning unmistakable; then the door closed behind him.

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The dull grey light of early morning lit up the place when he again emerged and, the black medicine-case under his arm, came down the stair. The nurse, middle-aged, bespectacled, well nourished, was awaiting him. She was a stranger and he inspected her impartially, impassively, as though she were a new instrument submitted to his consideration.

"You are completely at liberty?" he asked at last.

"Yes."

"For a week at least; perhaps longer?"

"Yes," again.

"I take it for granted you are perfectly familiar with this particular work?"

"I've been doing it steadily for ten years, Doctor."

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A moment longer Watson continued the dispassionate, enigmatic gaze.

"Very well, then, consider yourself absolutely in charge." He gave a few minor directions swiftly, methodically. "Call me if there is need; otherwise not. I can depend upon this unconditionally, and that you'll not leave the house during the time I mentioned?"

"Yes, Doctor."

Still the blue eyes held her relentlessly.

"Nor 'phone to anyone except me in the meantime?"

The woman understood. Hysterical Mrs. Waldow had not been silent.

"I repeat, Doctor, you can depend upon me absolutely."

"Thank you. I accept the assurance. You are in charge now."

Mrs. Waldow, red eyes, restlessly impatient, was standing just behind; and in silence, she following docilely, Watson led the way into the damply stuffy sitting-room.

"She's sleeping now," he anticipated, "and perfectly safe. It's a boy. May I raise a window, please?"

He drew two chairs into the current of fresh air and waited until the landlady, still strangely submissive, was seated before he himself followed.

"Is there anything else you'd like to know?" he asked kindly.

The woman shook her head.

"No, I guess not—now."

Watson waited, still considerate, until she looked up; then of a sudden the same dominant personality of a few hours before took possession of her completely, held her fast.

"Very well," the man leaned forward just perceptibly, "let's come to an understanding then. First of all I wish to know, please, what you know about Miss Belmont; when she came here, why, if alone—everything."

The landlady writhed. She was between the upper and the nether millstones and impotent absolutely. She tried to avoid those wide-set, relentless eyes, but she could not; though she struggled, hardly wished to. Against her will, against specific direction—direction to which she had given her oath—she was consciously surrendering to their dominance. One defence and one only she essayed.

"You mustn't—ask it of me, Doctor, I—promised——"

"I understand perfectly, but you did it blindly." Definitely this time the man's long body leaned forward, compellingly. "Take it for granted I have the right to ask. You don't doubt me?"

"No." It was surrender absolute. "No, I don't doubt you. I—can't."

Watson waited, looking out on the dismal, muddy street with its fresh streaks of lighter clay washed from the overhanging bank; waited for—anything.

And the story came; at first haltingly, stumblingly; then swifter and more swiftly until the words fairly crowded each other, until the listener could not have checked the flow if he had wished. Not an incident was missed, not a detail from the initial ring of supercilious Norman Tracy until the present moment. It was a flood, that narrative, an outpouring impossible to the mercenary, callous Mrs. Waldow of a year before. No person lives for self alone, nor had Eula Felkner. At the close, heated, breathless, panting, the narrator leaned back temporarily exhausted; but ready at the slightest provocation to elaborate afresh, to attempt anew a malediction she had not language to adequately express.

And during it all Bruce Watson had not stirred, had not interrupted. Through half-closed eyes he had watched delivery wagon after wagon flounder spattering past through the mud; watched them almost as though he were conscious of their passage.

A minute went by. The woman's breathing became normal.

"It," the man's voice was very quiet, very even, "was in October they came, you say?"

"Yes, the thirtieth. I remember the date exactly. I——"

"They must have gone out very little."

"Not at all," hotly. "The girl hasn't been outside the yard once since she came to town. Not once; only think of it!" The speaker's face con-

gested prophetically. "How I grew to hate that man, hate——"

"Pardon me," Watson had faced about impassively, "but don't do that, please. It's useless absolutely." Again he paused until his companion met his eyes. "I have other calls to make, Doctor Clayton's calls, and can't stay longer now; but before going I have a favour to ask." His look became analytical, almost doubtful. "Does anyone else in the house, the maids, the roomers, know what just happened?"

Mrs. Waldow returned the gaze blankly, uncomprehensively.

"No, the house is very well built, and since Mr. Tracy left the next room has been vacant. No one heard last night, and the roomers aren't up yet this morning. The girls all sleep downstairs back of the kitchen. They won't know until it comes time to——"

"Don't let that time come." Watson cut her off meaningly. "Take care of the work yourself; the nurse will help you. Don't let anyone else come near—near enough to learn anything. That's the favour I wish to ask you; do this until I come again. Do you understand?"

"You mean," the excitement of comprehension began to glow in the landlady's face, "I'm to pretend there—is no child?"

"Exactly."

The fascination of the idea augmented. For a

second it seemed to the woman a solution of something she had thought not to be solved; then of a sudden came second thought and her face fell.

"But they already anticipated——" she refuted ambiguously. "Before long they'd all——"

"Never mind before long," Watson didn't stop to explain, "leave that to me. All I ask is that nobody knows until I come again." There was a warning sound from the rear of the house, obviously the maids were up, and he spoke hurriedly. "Unless something happens I shan't return for a week." He anticipated the inevitable surprise. "Don't ask me why. Take my word for it I have a very good reason, and that everything will come out all right. Do just what I ask. Let everything go on as usual; just as though nothing had happened. Can I depend upon you?"

Again the landlady was fumbling absently at her throat; but her lips were firm.

"Yes," she said.

"There's just one other thing." Watson arose to go and stood looking down on his companion immovably. "Mr. Tracy will probably call or send someone to enquire. Most of all he mustn't know, mustn't be allowed inside the house." The speaker paused and second by second the woman felt the old dominance gripping her tighter and tighter. "Don't arouse his suspicion if you can avoid it. Lie to him first, tell him—anything; but remember he must be kept ignorant yet at any cost. If he becomes insist-

ent"—of a sudden the man turned away, turned until his face was hidden—"if he becomes insistent," he repeated, "let me know at once." The tongue thickened irresistibly, but the words were quiet as ever. "There's a limit to tolerance—even in South Dakota."

Chapter XVIII

DISILLUSIONMENT

MISS BERKELEY sat in her own cosy private room—some way everything about this woman had a cheerful habit of turning to comfort—ostensibly reading, but in reality doing nothing, when the maid entered. She who came was a brand-new maid,—the old having of a sudden flown like a bird of passage by night, leaving behind a note of airy satire upon the tameness of small cities in general and of Sioux Falls in particular,—likewise she was of Swedish extraction, and her approach was marked with diffidence. But recently elevated, the awe of personal attendance was still heavy upon her.

“Please, miss,” she announced, “there’s a gentleman downstairs who wishes to see you.”

Her mistress did not look up; but a close observer could have noticed a tightening of the fingers on the cover of the book. Miss Flora Berkeley was not burdened with callers.

“Didn’t he give you his card?” she asked at last evenly.

“No.” Why the article designated should have been tendered her was beyond the girl’s comprehension; but nevertheless she was on safe ground. “He only said to tell you he wished to see you.”

A year previously there would probably have been

an outburst, later regretted, but now the other only faced about.

"A gentleman, Erma?" She observed the girl kindly. "What sort of one, please?"

Again the plump maid was in doubt. A single idea suggested itself.

"A stylish gentleman, miss," she described, "with a cane and a silk hat."

Unconsciously the woman relaxed; a look almost of disappointment flashing for an instant over her face. Then she too had an idea.

"Has he—red hair, Erma?"

"Yes," quickly, "and his face——" The speaker halted with a jerk, her own very red.

But Miss Berkeley did not notice. She had leaned back and, her hands behind her head, sat looking at the cover of the novel reversed in her lap, meditatively, peculiarly. For more than a minute, while uncomfortable Erma stood shifting from leg to leg, she sat so; then of a sudden she looked at the girl steadily.

"I've an errand for you, Erma," she digressed evenly. "I nearly forgot it. You know the big policeman on Ninth Street beat?"

The girl's wide open eyes spoke her mystification.

"The one with the jolly, round face, miss?"

"Yes. It's only a few blocks down there, and you can find him easily. Tell him, please, I wish to see him," she consulted a tiny French clock on the desk before her enigmatically, "in twenty minutes now—"

at three exactly." The black eyes returned to the wondering, open-eyed listener. "At three exactly; and emphasise that it's very important. Will you remember?"

The blonde head nodded affirmation. The mouth closed.

"Yes, miss."

"And when he comes send him up at once."

"Yes, miss."

"You'll not forget?" The questioning eyes were very direct, very insistent.

"No, miss."

For a moment longer the mistress paused; then again she looked away languidly.

"That's all, Erma. Show in the gentleman before you go, please."

The maid was already at the door awaiting the first opportunity of escape.

"Yes, miss," she said.

"I trust," Tracy, hat in hand, had paused at the door, but the woman had not turned, had not even altered her position, "I do not intrude, Mrs. Thurston?"

"Miss Berkeley, you doubtless meant to say."

"Yes, pardon me; a mere slip of the tongue." The voice was elaborately sarcastic. "In these modern days it's difficult to keep the names of one's woman friends up to date. I repeat, Miss Berkeley, I hope I don't intrude?"

"Emphatically, you do," the voice had grown languid as the sultry afternoon itself, "but we won't discuss that." The dark head nodded toward a seat. "It's cooler over there by the window, Mr. Tracy."

For a second the man's lashless eyes tightened malevolently; then he accepted the place designated smilingly.

"Frankness always was your most attractive quality, Flora; that is, next to another," he observed meaningly. "I remember admiring it in—in a previous existence, when you were Miss Berkeley before."

"Thank you," drawlingly, tantalisingly. "It's always pleasant to be appreciated."

"Yes," Tracy took a fresh grip on the smile, "and that brings us down to the present. Do you know I've called a half dozen times this summer—and found you out in every instance?"

One of the clasped hands shifted just a trifle, and at the motion the short sleeve, released, slipped down, revealing a white arm to the elbow.

"How should I know, seeing I was out and you left no card?"

Again Tracy observed her doubtfully. For a moment the egotism of the man almost—— Just in time he remembered the French maid and the slammed door.

"Flora," of a sudden the hat in his lap went to the floor and he leaned forward intensely, "let's drop

this masquerade and talk like the old friends we are.” With the old histrionic trick his red-pitted face softened, his voice grew personal, intimate. “You know I’ve always admired you, from the first time we met; but I was married then and you—were married soon too. I”—he paused, hoping she would glance up, but she did not—“I know that probably you’ve heard a lot of things that weren’t nice about me; people will prattle about those in our class. I’ve heard gossip concerning you; but I didn’t believe a single word, and I don’t think you ought to about me. I’m not really bad. Much as I wished to, I never even tried to see you alone until you came here. You’ll have to admit that.” Again he leaned farther forward. Again the histrionic throbbed in his voice. “But now we’re both free, free as air; and wiser. We’re both immeasurably better fitted to enjoy life, enjoy each other, than we were then. It seems almost Providential, our being here together so. I’m a bit of a fatalist: I believe sometimes it really is. Why can’t we begin anew where we left off; begin now? I”—a real moisture came to his eyes, his voice really trembled—“I—love you, Flora Berkeley.”

On the desk the tiny clock ticked ahead noisily, and the eyes of the woman observed it enigmatically. Once the second hand made the circle of the diminutive dial and, unhesitating, renewed its endless journey. For the first time the black eyes shifted to her visitor’s face. In their depths lurked a smile; a baffling, maddening smile.

"You did that very well, Mr. Tracy," commented an appreciative voice, "exceedingly well."

"Miss Berkeley! Flora!"

"I repeat, you have my congratulations. If you ever lose your inheritance you still have a fortune in your possession."

Again for a space the voice of the clock was alone in the room; then of a sudden the man stiffened. Beneath the red lids the close-set eyes peered forth menacingly.

"I'm to understand, then, that you don't believe me, that you decline absolutely to do what I ask?"

The bare white arm dropped outward in token of impotency.

"You exhaust my vocabulary completely. Your intuition is as perfect as your art."

The man's red face went almost pale. His lips parted, but for some reason closed again in silence. Instinctively he fumbled in his pocket and produced a cigarette and a match.

"Pardon me," the level black eyes, unsmiling now, were holding his relentlessly, "but I don't recall granting you permission to smoke." It was as though she were addressing a refractory youth still in his 'teens. "You will wait until you get outside, please."

The last trace of the man's self-control vanished. Like a flash he was on his feet, the cigarette ground to powder under his heel.

"Flora Berkeley," he blazed, "curse you! Do

you fancy for a second I'll take this sort of thing from any woman, even you?"

For a moment the other did not answer, did not stir. Her eyes were set straight past the man, toward the dainty little bird's-eye-maple writing desk at the opposite side of the room. What she wished she saw, but—but—— Of a sudden up the gravel walk from the street there sounded a step, a man's step; heavy, grinding. As suddenly her black eyes shifted, looked those red-rimmed, threatening eyes above her fair; mockingly fair.

"I fancy you will, Mr. Tracy," she said.

"Fancy I will!" For an instant the man hesitated in pure wonder. He had not interpreted that pause thus. Then the full, sensual lips of him opened in a smile, a smile which was grossest insult. "Fancy I will?" he repeated. "You don't know me very well, Flora Berkeley; not nearly so well as you will a half hour from now." The smile vanished. The pitted cheeks blazed in a passion more intense than anger, more horrible. "Do you consider it—wise to defy me now, Flora? I give you one more chance; and I'd advise you to think well before you answer." He halted in the deliberate instinctive interim every animal of prey offers the victim in its power before the final tragedy; his lips a bit apart, his nostrils wide. In the silence of the pause the front door opened and closed, the heavy tread, softened now until it was all but noiseless, crossed the vestibule, crept up the stairs, was almost upon them; but uncon-

scious, Tracy took no notice, did not hear. Never in his life had he been more sure of himself, more certain of a definite dénouement. "I'll make you pay dear for this insult, Flora Berkeley, pay——"

"Pardon me," the interrupting voice was as stolidly impersonal as the round, heated face; "but you wished to see me, miss?"

"Yes," the woman's dark eyes had of a sudden grown almost languid again, "how's the—wife to-day?"

The big officer was deceived—almost. If he hadn't himself heard——

"Better, miss, thank you—and thanks to you." With an effort he repressed a grin. "And the boy——"

"I'll want him again to-morrow. The lawn needs cutting and the garden attention. He's"—the words were weighed carefully as though loth to give undue praise—"the best boy I ever employed."

"Thank you kindly, miss."

The black eyes contracted in deep thought.

"There's something else I wished to speak with you about; but—— Pardon me, Mr. Tracy, you're not going so soon?" Solicitation spoke in the even voice, surprise as well. "I'll be through in a moment, I only——"

Alone, Miss Flora Berkeley, one time of most exclusive drawing-rooms, aristocrat born and bred, and a common policeman, heated with the effort of a hurried call from his beat, looked at each other.

As they did so the grin on the man's jolly round face, long repressed, broadened openly, understandingly. The bang of the front door below broke the spell. The woman arose and from a drawer in the dainty writing desk extracted an equally dainty silver purse, from the purse a bit of green paper.

"I trust," she proffered the latter equivocally, "the—wife will continue to improve, officer."

The grin became a chuckle, the chuckle a frank, appreciative roar.

"Thank you. And the boy?"

Miss Berkeley did not smile, nor did she appear offended.

"On second thought I—hardly believe I'll need the boy after all," she said.

It was not a pleasant face to look upon which confronted Mrs. Waldow as she opened the front door; and instinctively at the revelation the substantial bulk of her body adjusted itself to the narrow space of the aperture.

"I called," the visitor did not condescend the courtesy of a greeting, "to find out why I can't get any satisfaction here by 'phone. Isn't your instrument working?"

"Yes, sir—but"—from within the door knob was surreptitiously grasped by a tighter grip—"but it's out of repair some way. I ordered it examined several days ago, and still——" The sentence ended in an all explanatory sigh.

The man observed the speaker sourly.

"I seem to be able to get you clearly enough—and then; I can't make heads or tails of what you say then."

"Yes, I know, sir. It's acting that way right along. It's an awful nuisance, sir."

The man scowled, but let the subject rest.

"Very well. Now, however, that I'm here I trust you can at least talk intelligently."

"I trust so, sir," respectfully.

"All right," the scowl was repeated, "how is Miss Tracy, then?"

"Very well, sir," promptly. "As well as could be expected. Not yet, sir," she added hurriedly at the other's meaning look, "nor for a few days possibly."

For a second longer the visitor frowned at her doubtfully; then he seemed satisfied.

"You have done everything required, I suppose?—If you need more money——"

The landlady swallowed hard.

"Everything possible has been done, Mr. Tracy. Have no uneasiness, sir."

Though she was endeavouring hard to appear natural, Mrs. Waldow was not a good actor, and something in her manner aroused the man's suspicion. His sour face tightened in unpremeditated intent.

"Doubtless you're telling me the truth," he satirised, "but to make sure I'll go up a moment myself."

He advanced a step significantly. "Merely to make sure."

"Pardon me," the woman stiffened obviously for the battle, "but I can't let you do so just now, Mr. Tracy. It's—it's the doctor's orders."

"Damn the doctor's orders!" The menace, ever so near, flashed over the red face anew. "I have some rights here myself. Move aside."

But there was no movement of obedience. The door even closed slightly.

"Pardon me again, sir," the voice this time was almost servilely propitiating; "but I repeat I can't comply—now. I have my directions."

"Can't?" Tracy paused an instant in sheer astonishment; then the same look which so shortly before had confronted Miss Berkeley, the look of irresponsibility absolute, flamed in the red eyes afresh. "Won't—you mean. Have you forgotten who I am; taken leave of your senses completely? Out of my way, I say, or—— Out of my way."

Then for the second time within the hour occurred to Norman Tracy the unexpected. Of a sudden from a mere rift the door swung wide open, remained so. From servile inferiority the attitude of the woman altered unbelievably; became equal, all but majestic, in its condemnation. Her faded steel-blue eyes met his fearlessly, with a blaze in their depths uncompromising as his own.

"Taken leave of my senses; you ask me that?" she challenged. "Forgotten who you are, Mr.

Tracy: you of all men speak that insult to me?" As completely as though it had never occurred she had forgotten her promise to Watson, forgotten the carefully planned scheme of concealment. Superior to every other consideration, blotting them, for the moment, out absolutely, the maternal instinct, long dormant in her starved life, at last flamed forth; outraged, irresistible. "No, I've not forgotten you, Norman Tracy; forgotten you nor what you've done." She advanced a step out of the doorway and instinctively the man fell back. "But one thing I had forgotten for a moment, and lied to you; yes, lied to you, Norman Tracy. For it has happened; there is a child upstairs; a boy, your son. But you won't go up, even though you know it, even though I shan't try to stop you. You don't dare to, degenerate as you are; don't dare to look him in the face. That's what for a moment I forgot, Mr. Tracy; that you're a coward." She stepped back free of his path; deliberately, significantly. "The way is clear, there's nothing whatever to prevent. I dare you to go, Norman Tracy; dare you!"

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The cut-glass decanter upon the buffet in the man's room at the hotel was ruddy brown when he entered. Within five minutes thereafter it was colourless as when it left the factory and the man himself was poring over the pages of a railroad guide-book. It took him but a moment to find what he wished and, rising, he pressed the button of the call bell viciously.

His finger was on the button for the second time when a tap sounded on his door and at his surly "come" a youthful shock head was thrust inside.

"You—rang, sir?"

"Yes, something less than an hour ago." The speaker paused with a malevolent scowl. "Tell the clerk I wish to take the evening 'Central' east and to have my bill, my full bill, ready."

"Yes, sir."

"And to call me in time for my baggage. You'll not forget?"

"No, sir."

Alone, Tracy went about the routine of packing. For fifteen minutes he worked swiftly, methodically, in grim-mouthed silence. For five minutes longer he still worked; but interruptedly and to an accompaniment of incoherent, cursing soliloquy. Then again fell silence and aimlessly, unsteadily, he wandered from place to place about the room. The big Turkish chair was an inspiration, a godsend, an all-adequate solution; and in an unconscious abandon he sank into it, drowsily, gratefully. "B-bless you, ol' fren'," he sobbed brokenly, "b-bless y'!"

Promptly at the appointed time came a tap on the door, another, and, no response forthcoming, a curious shock head, ready to retreat at an instant's alarm, thrust into the room. A moment it paused so while its possessor took stock of the surroundings: the litter, the half-packed trunk, the—the—— Another pause, a long, open-mouthed pause, followed;

then a grin, boyish, exultant, indescribable, flashed over the freckled, observing face, and the fearless youth came wholly within. For the third time he halted, gloating in full leisure at this, his enemy's downfall; then, the opportunity was far too precious to lose, he deliberately, mockingly thumbed his nose—and once again.

Chapter XIX

THE HEART OF WOMAN

"YOU may go now for a bit." In the corridor outside Eula Felkner's room Watson had been listening in silence to the nurse's methodical report of the past week. "I'll be here for an hour or so myself."

"Thank you, Doctor." The woman paused and her voice lowered. "You—heard, I suppose?"

"Yes. Mrs. Waldow herself 'phoned me immediately afterwards." The man omitted any reference to the incoherent penitence of that confession. "This releases you, of course."

"Very well, Doctor. It'll make no difference in the least, however."

Watson nodded.

"I thank you," he said simply.

As a moment later the man opened the door of the east room he was of a sudden aware, as we are instinctively conscious of another's presence at night, that his every movement was being observed; stealthily, breathlessly; but his manner gave no hint of the knowledge. He closed the door softly, holding back the latch so it would not click, and placed his hat and ubiquitous case methodically upon the table. An evening paper left by the nurse lay spread before him,

and he paused a moment to glance at the headlines; then with grave courtesy he advanced toward the corner and the bed.

"Good-evening, Eula," he said.

Direct at him from out a soft white face stared forth two wide-open brown eyes; indecisive now, a bit fearful.

"Good-evening, Doctor Watson," hesitatingly.

The man placed a chair close and sat down.

"*Doctor Watson?*" he suggested with the faintest accent.

"Bruce——" she substituted at last.

"Thank you." The speaker neither avoided nor courted her look. "That helps us materially on our journey. Needless to say, I didn't call professionally, Eula. The nurse reports you're doing finely and in a bit you'll be up and around again as well as ever. It's about other things I called; things you understand without mentioning."

"Yes." The nervous fingers were still working with the bedclothes, but meanwhile the abnormally wide eyes were probing the mystery of her companion's face, probing it desperately, futilely. If she but knew how much he himself already knew, knew positively! "Yes," she repeated, "I think I understand. But I'd rather not talk of it, please," very craftily she shifted the lead; "rather not resurrect our—intimacy. It's dead; I explained a year ago. I'm very, very sorry, for your sake, but it's so. To recall it now would be useless."

"Useless?" The voice was gentle as a spring-time shower. "Useless, you say?"

"Yes, useless," with desperate swiftness. "I told you when you came East to see me that Norman and I—that—that——"

"Eula," insistently.

No answer save an uncontrollable trembling of the soft oval chin.

"Eula Felkner!"

The white face tightened in a last supreme effort. She would learn all—at once.

"Eula Tracy, you mean."

"Eula Felkner," the man ignored the dissimulation, "don't you trust me?"

Again there was no response; but the brown eyes were dim now and the chin was trembling more than before.

"I repeat, don't you trust me, Eula? Answer, please."

A moment longer the silence lasted; then came the cloudburst; tempestuous, uncontrollable, inevitable. Minutes it lasted, long, dragging minutes; and through it all, silent, motionless, the man sat looking away, his long, angular face with its dogged jaw line a wonderful, impenetrable mask. Only the spread of the wide nostrils gave clue to the furnace raging beneath that emotionless exterior, gave hint of the relentless white-hot menace that for days had been augmenting, augmenting until now no human power could prevent its ultimate outburst. Not un-

til the coming of the last pattering sob did he turn back, did he interrupt by even a syllable. Then, gently insistent, he repeated for the third time his question.

And he had his reward. The glorious brown eyes met him now openly, without a trace of artifice therein.

"I trust you, Bruce Watson?" intensely. "Yes, as I—trust no one else on earth, more than I—trust God himself!" She paused, breathless at the sacrilege; but the mood would not down. "Oh, how could I ever have changed as I have changed, learned to care for another, for——"

"Eula——"

"Forgive me, Bruce, but I can't help it. I hate myself so, hate myself; but still"—she was merciless in her confession, blindly merciless—"if I were to live the past year over again, I know—I know I'd do the same again." From beneath the cover crept forth two soft brown arms, clasped beneath her head. "Yes, knowing everything I'd do the same again. It's awful of me, awful; and when I think of you, how——"

"Eula," sternly, peremptorily, "stop! I refuse to listen. I——" The man caught himself with an effort. "Eula," the voice was of sudden impassively even again, but there was no mistaking its finality, "in whatever we say to-day, if in future we chance to meet again, I ask—your pardon—demand that you leave the past wholly out of the conversation. As you

say, it's dead. Let it rest." He leaned forward, his elbow on his knee. "It's the future, your future, I wish to speak of now. If you'd rather not I'll go. Do you wish me to go, Eula?"

Into the brown eyes crept a new look, a helpless, fearful look.

"No," swiftly, "a thousand times no. I want you to stay and understand—everything."

"You don't care, then, won't be offended if I ask a few questions?"

The brown head shook emphatic negation.

"Ask anything you wish and I'll answer you truly."

Over the wide blue eyes the lashes closed just a shade.

"To begin with, then, you didn't mean I should know now, should ever know, what you'd done. You—lied to me for that reason?"

"Yes, Bruce."

"And your mother; you told her the same story?"

"Yes," steadily. "She believes I'm married—and very, very happy."

Yet another shade the long lashes closed in a way the man had when concentrated.

"You gave another name to Mrs. Waldow, emphasised it, she said. Why was that, please?"

Instinctively the brown hands went to their owner's face, covered it from view.

"You really want me to explain that, Bruce?"

"As you wish, Eula. I'm merely your—friend."

For the first time there was a pause; but it was brief. Then the hands returned beneath the brown head.

"Yes, I wish you to know that too, Bruce. I," quietly, unbelievably quietly, "meant to kill myself. It's horrible, but I saw no other way. I meant to suicide, Bruce."

"And leave the child?" The man was looking her through and through.

"Yes. I'd thought it all out. Norman would take care of baby. He couldn't have refused that. No human being could."

Watson's elbow shifted from knee to knee equivocally.

"But supposing he had, Eula? Supposing he'd left town, left no one knew for where?"

In a flash the brown head shifted, looked the questioner intensely, almost fiercely.

"Has he gone, Bruce?" she voiced pleadingly. "Tell me, has Norman gone?"

An instant the man hesitated. With all his knowledge of the girl's past, in the very face of her confession he had hardly expected the revelation of that query.

"No," he said simply. "Mr. Tracy is still here."

The girl dropped back with a sigh of relief, almost of justification.

"I knew he wouldn't go," she voiced trustingly, "go without seeing baby. He's not nearly so bad as you think him, Bruce. Not nearly so bad." In

the glamour of the reaction hope had of a sudden risen from its own ashes. "He's only—different."

Her companion straightened, the long arms folded across his chest.

"You still believe in him, Eula?" he asked.

"Believe in him?" They were eye to eye. "Yes, I believe in him, Bruce."

"And care for him?"

The girl almost smiled. In her present mood the question seemed fairly absurd.

"Care for him!" She fairly joyed in the repetition. "Haven't I showed that I care for him, haven't I given him—everything?"

Of a sudden she remembered, but the light did not leave her face. "I know you can't understand, know no man can, but I'll never cease caring for him. Whatever he's done in the past makes no difference. If he were to go away to-day and never return, never even write me or let me know he'd gone, I'd still care for him. I know what everyone who knows thinks, what you even think; but it makes no difference, I love him, Bruce Watson; better than I love self, better than I love baby, better even than I love God. I don't know why, it's beyond reason, beyond explanation; but I love him, love him!" She was silent.

Again the listener turned away, and again into the line of the set jaw came the former prophecy of menace. Of a sudden a faint understanding of the reality came to the girl and at the possibility suggested her eyes grew wide once more, fearful.

"Bruce——" she pleaded.

At first the other did not hear.

"Bruce Watson——" tensely. The suggestion had assumed the proportions of certainty now.

This time the man turned gravely.

"You," the girl was searching the long face line by line for an answer, "don't mean to—to hurt him, Bruce?"

Her companion returned the look immovably.

"Can't you trust me to—do what is right, Eula?"

"Yes," swiftly, "but I want everything put in words. All women do," she justified. "Answer me, please."

"Very well." With the old unconscious movement the man's long body slid down in the chair until the great bushy head rested on the high back. "But first, I've another question to ask. In a few weeks you'll be about again. What, please, do you intend doing then?" He ignored absolutely the former suggestion of melodrama. No need with that tiny mound by the girl's side to tell him its futility. "Answer me that first, Eula."

Beneath ten restless fingers the white coverlet worked afresh.

"I—don't know, Bruce. There's been so much to think about. I—when Norman comes I'll tell you. Until then I—I don't know."

"You," the wide blue eyes bore no trace of irony, "expect him to come, Eula?"

"Yes," tensely, "I know he'll come."

"Pardon me," the voice still carried no suggestion of doubt, merely solicitude, "but have you any reason for believing so, any assurance?"

"No," haltingly, "no assurance; I merely—feel it myself." It was trust sublime, superior wholly to reason. "He simply couldn't stay away now. I know it. I know it!"

Involuntarily the listener passed a hand across his face; but that was all.

"And when he does, Eula. Can you forgive him, forgive—everything?"

"Forgive him!" Real wonder was in the swift return. "There's nothing to forgive, I tell you. I— I love him."

Once more the questioner paused and for the second time the hand repeated its unconscious motion.

"Pardon me again, Eula: I hate to hurt you, but I must know. When Mr. Tracy returns," no hint that the return was not as she had said, certain, "can you—— I won't say it; you understand what I mean. Will he consent?"

For the first time a trace of colour came into the girl's face. The long lashes drooped.

"I don't think so, Bruce. He's different." She looked up almost challengingly. "Leastways, I shouldn't ask it. I accept him as he is. I'll live with him here, live with him anywhere without. I repeat, I shan't ask it."

"But—this is a mere supposition, Eula. We must

look at the possibilities from all sides, you know—if sometime he should leave you again, if——”

“He won’t, I tell you,” fiercely. “He might possibly have done so before; but now——” The girl paused for adequate words and in vain. “He simply won’t. There’s no use supposing,” she completed.

Watson straightened. His great shoulders squared.

“Yes,” he corroborated, “there’s no use of supposing; and I’ve only one more question to ask, then I’ll go.” From beneath his long lashes he looked down at his companion with an intensity which, not in the least understanding, she nevertheless remembered to her dying day. “When Mr. Tracy comes, after you are married”—he repeated the words evenly, deliberately—“after you are married you won’t mind if sometimes he doesn’t seem to care for you so much as he might—men are that way at times, you know—won’t be sorry so long as he stays with you, so long as he is kind?”

The listener scarcely believed her ears.

“Married—you say?”

“Yes, married, Eula.”

For seconds the girl did not stir; then of a sudden she drew a long breath as of one aroused from sleep.

“Sorry, Bruce?” The great brown eyes had opened gloriously wide. “No, never; not if he wasn’t even kind. So long as he’s with me that’s all I ask, all I wish in the world. I’d be happy, happy—I can’t tell you how happy. It’s just the chance to be near

him I want. Just that." Again she halted; but the glimpse of Paradise suggested was too good to be credible. To her came this time the question.

"Do you think that he'll do it, Bruce," she queried tensely, insistently; "think of his own free will he'll suggest it?"

"Yes, Eula," very gravely, "I think he'll do it."

"Without my asking him? You know I won't do that, Bruce."

"Yes," again. "Without you asking it of him, Eula."

"Oh, oh!" At arms' length the girl's hands clasped before her on the bed. Her eyes closed; but though she spoke no more aloud her lips kept moving, and a moment later from beneath the shut lids two great tears gathered and stood irresolute on her cheeks.

Of a sudden Watson rose and on tiptoe moved over to the window and drew back the old-fashioned lace curtains. A breath of the already cooling evening air met him face to face, and with a repressedly restless motion one big-jointed hand went combing through his shock of hair unnecessarily. After a pause, a long pause, his name was spoken; at first softly, then louder and insistently. He returned slowly, but he did not again sit down.

"Bruce," the tears had gone now, but the spot where they had been was still moist, "we probably won't see each other much in future. I know you, and that you'll never come near me—now." The

preface begun so bravely halted while the speaker swallowed hard. "So while I have the chance I wish to—to thank you for all you've done, to——"

"Don't please," preventingly. "I'd rather you wouldn't. I understand without your saying it."

"Very well," uncertainly; "but another thing. We"—she looked away—"we were so different once and for so long." The eyes returned, pleadingly, recklessly. "It was all my fault. I wish to know you forgive me, forgive Norman——"

"Eula!" Like tiny ropes the great arteries stood out on the man's bare throat, at his temples. "Can't you remember?" Again he caught himself and again the arms folded across the broad chest. "If there's anything to forgive I've forgiven you long ago. You're but natural."

"And Norman," insistently, desperately. "Tell me you forgive him too?"

The man eyed her impassively.

"You mustn't talk any more now," he said. "I request it."

"I won't," simply, "after your answer. Tell me, Bruce, before you go that you forgive him, that"—the old fear redoubled—"that you won't hurt him; won't touch him even though he doesn't of himself do—what we think he ought, if"—chokingly—"if he shouldn't return at all. Promise me on your word of honour you won't hurt him, Bruce."

Still the man did not stir. Still his face was a mask.

"I repeat," evenly, "I think he will return."

The girl half lifted on her elbow. Her white face tightened.

"But promise me," she pleaded. "As you loved me once, promise."

"Eula," the voice was neither raised nor lowered, but from its unemotional evenness the girl knew as she knew life itself there was no appeal, and she dropped back with closed eyes, waiting, "you must be mad, or you wouldn't ask of me what you do. I can't promise, girl. God himself would not promise; and I'm not God. As you say, we'll probably never meet again alone. Good-bye."

There was a pause; then without opening her eyes the girl knew he was leaving, heard his soft tread on the thinly carpeted floor. Her brain was seething, but out of the chaos one idea—an inspiration, she fancied it—was taking form. In desperate oblivious selfishness she grasped thereat; trusting all to this single cast. In the silence she heard him lift his case from the table. It was now or never and her eyes opened.

"Bruce!" she called.

The man paused, but he did not glance back.

"Bruce Watson!"

"Yes."

"Didn't you—forget something?" She scarcely recognised her own voice; but with one last supreme effort she kept on. "Won't you kiss me good-bye before you go, kiss me and—baby?"

She thought she was prepared for anything; and she was—save for the reality. For this time the man turned, turned fully, until she could see his face distinctly, see—— With a little inarticulate cry her hand went out involuntarily, drew the coverlet over her face, blotting out what she saw. For seconds which gathered into a minute she lay there trembling, scarcely breathing. In them she heard her own door close softly, later the front door below, and she knew he had gone. Still another moment she lay so, irresolute, panting; then of a sudden in an agony of remorse she reached out and drew the tiny swaddled bit of humanity at her side to her breast in the tightness of abandon.

“Oh, baby mine,” she sobbed hysterically.
“Baby! Baby!”

Chapter XX

THE RECKONING

THE small "Milwaukee" railway station and the much longer brick platform before were crowded and with as motley an assemblage as could well grace an equal space of earth's surface. The meeting-point for passengers actual and prospective for the north, the south, the east, and the west, the congregating spot of the State's main artery as well, it threw together indiscriminate types as varied as the bizarre population of the country itself. Side by side were debonaire, self-sufficient commercial travellers, and obsequious farm labourers, coatless and unshaven, en route to the ripening wheat-fields of the North. On the dilapidated benches fresh-looking matrons, representatives of the local semi-leisure class on the way to near-by summer resorts, sat elbow to elbow with ill-complexioned, perspiring immigrants bound for the interior and with the distinctive plebeian odour of their race surrounding them as a cloud. An Indian from the Crow Creek reservation brushed shoulders with an Assyrian peddler, dumbly patient under his pack and the possibility of gain in the land of promise a few stations beyond. Ubiquitous land-men, hawk-eyed, redolent of tobacco, towed about sweaty captive farmers from States to the east and south, ex-

patiating eloquently meanwhile anent the possibilities of the virgin country to the west whither they were ticketed. Broad-hatted ranchers with fierce moustaches and pockets bulging with recently purchased beer-bottles scraped acquaintance impartially on either hand and with the loud-voiced comradery typical of their class.

All these and others to fill pages were there that August day, shifting restlessly back and forth in the aimless movement of a crowd annihilating time; and in their midst, ruthlessly elbowed with the rest, exciting more curiosity than any, was still another type: a stockily built, exquisitely groomed man whose silk hat and sour red face had for the five minutes he had been waiting successfully repelled any suggestion of familiarity from even the convivial ranchers. It was past one o'clock, the heat was stifling, as usual the converging trains were already late and, after satisfying himself of this latter fact, the man returned his watch to his white waistcoat and scowled about him malevolently, indiscriminately, as though in some inexplicable way the other components of that sweltering throng were responsible for the delay. As he did so a hack clattered up the uneven street and halted, with an abruptness which all but threw the driver from his seat, at the far end of the platform; and having nothing else to do the traveller watched with languid interest to see what new specimen, as he ironically designated his waiting fellows, would emerge.

A moment later, and for no particular reason which

he would have admitted, he started walking; but in the direction opposite from that in which he had been looking. Again without admitting that the incident bore any particular significance, he was conscious that the man who had emerged—a tall, angular man whom he had once known—had paused for a second on the edge of the crowd inspecting it with swift scrutiny, and that his eyes had halted at sight of the single silk hat in its midst. For the first time in his life Norman Tracy vaguely regretted his partiality for that particular badge of respectability. Usually he had no aversion to conspicuity, but to-day and now, for some indefinite reason, it inspired only resentment. Idly, elaborately idly, he sauntered ahead, and at the end of the walk stopped to lean against the railing which ran the full length at his side. Of a sudden he remembered that it was very hot and, removing the offending beaver, he wiped his brow deliberately. Even then he did not return it to its place, but leaned there with the sun beating down on his stiff, red hair, convincing himself that it was cooler so. He did not look back, but against his will the mere sight of the man who had alighted had recalled the memory of a conversation he had carried on over the 'phone with Mrs. Waldow but an hour before. For some reason, at which he could but speculate, the landlady's tongue had been loosed and she had talked freely, more than freely. He mopped his brow again. Certainly it was very hot and, curses on these frontier roads, the train was still late!

Apparently by mere chance another man, one who likewise had strolled idly to the limit of the platform, stopped and a moment later took a place by his predecessor's side against the uninviting rail. Tracy did not glance around, but of a sudden the beaver returned to his head and again with elaborate aimlessness he started to return the way he had come. As he did so the newcomer likewise moved, stood blocking his path.

"Your pardon, Mr. Tracy," said an even voice, "but I wish to speak with you."

The hitherto remotely possible was inevitable now, and the traveller stiffened. His manner became a hundred and thirty odd degrees lower than the surrounding temperature.

"Your apology is in order, sir." The lashless eyes had met the other's menacingly. "But unfortunately I have no inclination whatever to grant your request."

Watson did not stir.

"This sort of thing is useless, absolutely, Tracy," he refuted unemotionally. "I repeat, I must speak with you, and we can't well talk here. I fancy the desire to avoid a scene is mutual, so you'd better come along uptown with me quietly. In this at least, I'm your friend. Are you willing to come?"

"Willing to come!" Tracy's lip curled in the most sarcastic of smiles. "I didn't know you drank like this, Watson. As your friend," he emphasised in ironic repartee, "I'd advise you to cut it. You're liable to run up against someone less good-natured

than myself and get into trouble. For the sake of your practice, man, cut it."

Watson said nothing, and at the silence the other's smile became a leer.

"You may be a bold bad man on the frontier, Watson," he resumed patronisingly, "I don't doubt you are; but in civilisation you're merely humorous." He took a step forward languidly. "A bromo seltzer is excellent for one in your condition. You'd better take one on your way uptown. For the present," he paused insolently and ready slang sprang to his lips, "take to the woods. Move on; you block my sunshine."

Watson's big hands went to his pockets, remained there like two bulging wens.

"Is that all?" he suggested dispassionately. "If not, I'm listening, and there's plenty of time."

Again Tracy's lip curled, but after a moment resumed the normal. Following two tiny streams of perspiration, gathering at the roots of his hair, began coursing down his cheeks and he wiped them away with an unsteady hand. Verily it was very hot.

"All for the present, I believe," he emphasised.

"Very well, then, let's go back where we left off." The blue eyes were wandering about the crowded platform leisurely. "Do you wish to do what I suggest quietly, or do you prefer publicity? I"—his glance returned suddenly—"shall not ask you again."

Once more down the red face the sweat streams were wandering by the lines of least resistance; but

this time Tracy did not notice. Instinctively he felt in his pockets for a cigar—and unavailingly.

“Permit me,” proffered the other politely.

Tracy looked hard, but accepted.

“Thanks.” He struck a match nervously and puffed until the tip was glowing. “Frankly, Watson,” the last trace of bravado had disappeared, but as he spoke his red-lidded eyes scanned the railroad track surreptitiously, “what do you mean? What have you got up your sleeve, anyway?”

The long man caught the look, and for an instant the wrinkles appeared at his temples.

“If it would be of interest,” he commented irrelevantly, “your train is still twenty miles up the line.” His face became unemotionally normal again.

“I mean exactly what I said. You’re not going east to-day, but uptown with me instead.”

“And if I refuse?” after a pause.

“I have a rather interesting scrap of paper in my pocket, and that sleepy policeman you see sitting over there on the trucks isn’t half as lazy as he looks.”

Tracy did not glance up. He had noted the individual designated previously. Unconsciously he moistened his lips.

“Supposing I do go with you?” He was trying to evolve a plan of campaign, but nothing save procrastination suggested itself. “What then?”

“That will depend entirely upon yourself,” curtly. “I don’t care to discuss the matter here.”

“Supposing again——”

The wens disappeared miraculously from the other's legs. The broad eyes tightened.

"Cut it," insistently, "to use your own phrase. I'm weary of this farce. You know well enough what this means, why I'm here. I've not interfered until the last possible moment. You've had every chance to redeem yourself, to prove that you possess even the rudiments of decency. Come now, or you'll regret it. Move on ahead."

For a second longer Tracy hesitated. Despite his effort no avenue of escape had suggested itself; but instead, perversely, only an augmenting, reflex anger that in his blind stupidity he had permitted himself to arrive in his present position. If he had but left when he should; have gone a week ago even. Swift as thought itself, inevitably connected, recurred the reason, the remembrance of the previous afternoon, and his pitted face congested malevolently. Curses on himself for an ass, and on her for—— He moved on obediently.

Leisurely, so leisurely as to pass uncommented, they moved back the way they had come; scowling-faced Tracy ahead, Watson following within arms' reach, the sweaty, restless crowd parting before them and closing indifferently behind. Opposite the baggage room Watson touched the other on the shoulder.

"I think," he suggested, "it would be well if you held your trunks."

For a second Tracy hesitated, then again he moved forward.

"Damn the trunks!" he anathematised; and Watson made no comment.

Again at the line of waiting hacks the leader halted.

"Is it permissible to ride?" he queried with deliberate sarcasm.

"Certainly." Watson himself led the way to the nearest and waited until his companion entered.

"Dr. Clayton's residence, driver."

"Clayton's it is, sir."

Up the long stretch of Phillips Avenue they clattered over the uneven cobbles, turned west at the corner of Ninth Street, and started to pass the big hotel, when of a sudden Tracy thrust his head out of the open window.

"Pull over to the Cataract a minute, cabby," he directed. He looked at his companion peculiarly. "Come in and have a drink on me, Watson. I'm dry as paper."

Very deliberately another head, a great bushy head, appeared in turn without the aperture.

"Go right on, driver," said a voice; "we've decided not to stop after all."

For an instant fire danced before Norman Tracy's eyes. He felt as though he would suffocate, and a soft freckled hand clutched instinctively at his collar.

"Damn you, Watson," he cursed, "you——" He halted abruptly. They were opposite the opera house corner now, and of a sudden in a flashing panorama of recollection he recalled another time they two

had been there, recalled what had followed, every incident of that mad escapade clear to the bitter dénouement. Despite his will, fight against the feeling as he might, the master clutch of the man opposite, established beyond question that former night, gripped him afresh: gripped tighter and tighter. A sensation akin to terror of this relentless, impassive human possessed him. He felt his self-assurance, his self-control ooze forth as the sweat oozed from his body until his collar was a rag. He leaned back in his seat; silent, waiting.

Before a comfortably-rambling old-fashioned house, set well back from the street in the centre of a big lawn, the carriage drew up, and without a word Watson alighted and led the way up the broad tarred walk. Still without explanation he followed a side path around to the rear and, producing a key, swung the door wide. The steps behind him halted suddenly; but he did not turn. Ten seconds passed so; then with a nod he indicated the open doorway.

"I'm waiting," he suggested.

"Watson," Tracy came forward at last until he stood opposite, a newborn suspicion stamped large upon his pitted face, "I've come so far without question, but before I go with you alone inside I want to know what you've got in mind. What the devil do you mean by asking me in there, anyway?"

For five seconds the other did not answer; then deliberately, maddeningly deliberately, he inspected the questioner from head to shoe tip and back again.

"Are you afraid, Mr. Tracy," just perceptibly the nostrils widened, "with twenty pounds in your favour, and as you once announced, a college athletic training, afraid to go with me into a private residence in the heart of town at two o'clock in the afternoon? Is it possible you——"

He closed the door behind them gently and, without a comment from the man watching, turned the lock and thrust the big latch key into his pocket.

The shades were down in Clayton's cosy library, but nevertheless the blaze of the midday sun made the place comfortably light. Face to face across the flat-top desk the two men sat looking at each other. From totally different viewpoints each knew they were approaching an epoch in their lives. Likewise in but differing measure each knew the deadly hate lurking in the other's mind. From the beginning down to the throbbing present man has not altered one iota in the fundamentals—and they were but men. Minutes passed, lingering, mocking minutes. Tracy still gripped the dead stump of his cigar in his teeth and unconsciously he chewed at it nervously. As usual Watson did not stir by so much as a single muscle. Upstairs, Clayton's telephone rang noisily, insistently; and was repeated. Watson did not answer, but nevertheless he aroused.

"Tracy," he tilted back in his chair, his hands sought his pockets, "I told you there in the crowd that I didn't wish a disturbance, and I don't wish one here; but there are certain things about you

which I must know, will know. Are you willing to—testify?”

“Must,” the other likewise roused. The cigar stump went to a convenient ash tray, “and—will, you say?”

“Yes,” quietly.

“Pardon me,” with an effort the visitor’s lips opened in a mirthless smile, “but before I answer I have a question to ask in turn. Who, bye the bye, are you, anyway? Are you God?”

“Perhaps,” unemotionally. “Leastways as far as your future is concerned you may consider me so. Will you kindly answer my question?”

Again as in the hack a freckled hand clutched at the binding collar. Though he had no thought of the comparison, the sensations of one hopelessly caught in quicksand were Norman Tracy’s that moment. Similarly he struggled helplessly against the inevitable.

“I won’t promise,” he refused doggedly. “I don’t recognise your right to demand it.”

“Don’t recognise my right!” swiftly. “Don’t you know who I am?”

“No, not further—— No.”

Watson leaned forward. Between narrowed lids he looked the other through and through.

“You mean to tell me,” slowly, “that what you attempted to do that second night we met was from pure, innate malice? That you would have done the same to—anyone?”

"Yes—I——" Of a sudden the voice paused, the red face went white, white to the lips. "Good God, Watson, is it possible that——" He stared as at a ghost. For a moment his guard dropped absolutely. "I never dreamed it before. She—Eula—refused always to tell me, she——" He was silent.

And for a long half minute Watson too was silent; but it was a terrible menacing calm. In it his chair went flat to the floor. His big jointed hands came to light.

"I don't doubt you, Tracy," he said, "though I didn't believe it possible to despise you more than before. Anyway, the fact makes no difference. It's not of ourselves I care to speak. It's of you and Eula. In so many words what do you intend doing concerning her? Perhaps you'll recognise my right to ask now?"

"I"—a bit of normal colour had returned to the other's face, a trace of the normal effrontery to his manner,—"I intend to treat her white, Watson." He brushed at a speck on his sleeve with unsteady carelessness. "I'm willing to settle any reasonable amount upon her, willing to support——"

"Don't temporise," swiftly. "I've done with dallying. In one word, yes or no, are you going to marry her?"

"Marry her?" Amazement real or feigned throbbed in the query. "Marry her!"

The long man said nothing.

"You're amusing, Watson. You——"

"Answer yes or no."

Tracy drew up in his seat. His eyes flamed.

"No," he said.

"Yes, you mean."

"No. Emphatically no. No to infinity. She came here to me of her own free will. I never promised her——"

"Stop! Stop, or—Tracy," the long man had risen, every muscle tightened in the passivity of repression, his great chin outtilted until it was all but a disfigurement, "the issue between yourself and myself I waive." He was his deliberate, impassive self again, was Bruce Watson, but infinitely more terrible than in the momentary passion of a second before. "There's another consideration immeasurably larger at stake. Eula Felkner loves you, trusts you yet. How she can do so God only knows; but it's true. She believes you're coming back to her, and as sure as I stand here, living or dead you're going." He moved forward a step until his body touched the edge of the desk. "If you're wise you'll mark that last statement, Norman Tracy, for I shan't speak it again. I know there's law in the land and preachers tell us retribution is God's; but there are cases superior to both tribunals, and yours is one. In this case, right or wrong, I represent both God and law. For the last time, I repeat, I don't wish to lay hand upon you, will avoid it if I can; but there's one way and one only you can prevent." Deliberately as though he were about to read an essay he reached in his pocket,

produced a folded sheet, spread it flat upon the desk top. "I mentioned before an interesting bit of paper. This is it. It isn't exactly what you fancied, I imagine; but no matter. It's a marriage license and your name and that of Eula Felkner are upon it." Equally deliberately he inspected his watch. "It's now 2.48. At four o'clock exactly there'll be a minister waiting in Mrs. Waldow's parlour. At the same time there'll be a hack stop here for you. I think it unnecessary to elaborate the connection between these two incidents; but both are inevitable as the passage of time." Tense, relentless as an Indian, the long body leaned farther forward, the great hands spread flat upon the desk top. "I'm"—God! The terrible, unemotional evenness of that low-toned voice!—"I'm taking considerable pains to be explicit because I don't wish you to misunderstand. I'm not warning you, however; I'm merely stating what is going to happen. I've done lots of thinking in the last week, Norman Tracy; multiply twenty-four by seven and you'll know how many hours. Whether I'm right in doing what I'm going to do I'm not the judge; no man is judge. Likewise what happens to me to-morrow if you again say no is immaterial. I have decided. It is to be." Just for a second he paused, but in it his face altered unbelievably. The wide eyes narrowed to mere slits. The great muscles of his neck rose beneath the skin like taut ropes. "You're heavier than I, Norman Tracy, and college-trained; but here alone, if you refuse, you can't get half through the Lord's prayer.

You know what I mean, and don't doubt me, man. This is absolutely the last word. The decision is yours. Will you or will you not marry Eula Felkner?"

The voice ceased and the room became still, still as death; so still that the very watch long Watson had consulted took voice. With an effort the huddled, bulky figure with the red hair and freckled, unsteady hands lifted in its seat. He realised that at last the vital moment had come, that he must answer; but like one in a nightmare he could not. To doubt the inevitability of the other's prophecy never occurred to him, to offer resistance even less. From the depths of his coward soul he was cowed, helpless. Hot as was the day, he felt cold and dry; dry as in a fever. He touched his tongue to his lips and they were no more moist than before. He saw the other make a move, a meaning move.

"I'm waiting," said a voice.

In absolute, blind terror the man threw out a detaining hand. The nightmare grip relented.

"Watson," he pleaded, "in God's name, don't. I believe you. I'll do anything you say, anything."

"You'll marry her?"

"Yes, I——"

"And never leave her afterwards; never so long as both of you live?"

"No, as God hears me, no."

"Nor hint by so much as an action that you didn't return willingly; neither to-day nor ever afterward?"

"No," again chokingly. "I swear it."

Watson moved around the desk noiselessly, stopped within arms' reach.

"And you'll be kind to her and to the child, kind as though you loved them?"

Once more Tracy's face went greyish white. With the wonderful distinctness of objects revealed in a lightning flash he realised what he was promising.

"Yes," haltingly, "I'll promise even that."

Watson's great arms folded across his chest.

"Get down on your knees," he commanded.

The other hesitated.

"Down, man, down!"

Tracy knelt.

"Swear to it."

No words came.

"Repeat after me. I swear——"

"I swear——"

"I'll be kind to Eula Felkner——"

"I'll be kind to Eula Felkner——"

"So long as I live."

"So long as I live."

Watson paused.

"So help me God."

"So help me God."

A moment they stood so, figures for a master painter, hopelessly beyond a writer's sphere; then noiselessly as he had advanced Watson returned, the narrow desk between.

"Stand up," he said.

Tracy arose; abject as a slave, abject as a dog.

"One last word," Watson waited until he caught the other's eye, held it, "and then don't ever speak to me again, not a single syllable. Perhaps after another hour we'll never see each other again. Perhaps we will. Leastways it makes no difference. I shall know of you and of your doings; know absolutely whether or not you keep your promise. If you do, well and good. It'll be as though I were dead. If not, as surely as the sun in shining outside, I'll hunt you out. The world isn't big enough for you to avoid me; and then—— Do you doubt me, Norman Tracy?"

Again for a second the nightmare terror held Tracy's tongue tight in its grip. Again with an effort he broke free.

"No, I don't doubt you, Bruce Watson," he mumbled.

"That's all then." The long figure relaxed. The blue eyes resumed their unemotional, childlike candour. "There's a bath and dressing-room upstairs if you wish to use it: first door to the right of the hall. We still have forty minutes. You are at liberty."

Promptly at 4.05 that afternoon there was a wedding in Mrs. Waldow's cheery east room. To say that the landlady herself presided with composure would be to speak untruth; but she was to be pardoned, for it was the first ceremony of the kind which had ever taken place under her roof. Likewise to

state that it was the rector of Eula Felkner's fancy who officiated would be to chronicle falsehood. Episcopal rectors are notably well nourished, and the gentleman in black and white who intoned the formula anything but fitted the specification. Leastways, however, it was all regular. If some of the signatures afterward appended were a bit uncertain, they were still legible, and the big free autograph of one of the witnesses, Bruce Watson by name, went far to make up the others' deficiency. All in all it was a successful event. Weddings are proverbially tense occasions.

Chapter XXI

BY THE ARBITER'S STANDARD

IT was 12.10 A. M. by the big clock in the Minnehaha County court-house tower. Here and there in the shaded residence portion of the town the glowing tip of a cigar stared forth from the darkness of a veranda—for in this the hottest August Sioux Falls had ever known many a bread-winner was loth to face the heat within; but as a whole the tiny prairie city was asleep. The silence was complete, unbelievably complete to ears accustomed to the merely diminished drone of a metropolis; so complete that before he reached the spot a certain long doctor, homeward bound at last, heard the tapping of a swarm of summer beetles as they collided with the globe of the arc light on the corner near Clayton's house. He was an observer of little things, this impassive man, and he halted a moment beneath the light meditatively, watching as newcomers after newcomers, an apparently inexhaustible supply, beat out their life against the hot surface. Doubtless he made certain mental deductions, for as he looked his long face assumed an expression so nearly cynical as the child-candid eyes would permit; but he spoke no comment—his was not the nature to indulge in soliloquy—and after a minute moved on.

Almost before the man had seated himself in Horace Clayton's cosy library, before his pipe was alight, the telephone above rang noisily. He waited a moment. It sounded again. Again he waited and in second repetition it clattered; with a vehemence which mirrored central's state of mind. This time the man arose, climbed the stairs; and when very shortly he returned it interrupted no more. The receiver was dangling like a disused pendulum from its cord.

The man lit his pipe and smoked steadily as an engine until it went dead. He refilled the bowl and smoked again until the very stem grew unbearable to the touch. Without a word he knocked out the ashes methodically and laid it upon the desk to cool. From a convenient drawer he produced a handful of cigars and tossed all save one beside the pipe. That one he lit, and leaned back, gazing up through a blue curling cloud at the ceiling.

How many cigars followed that first I will not say. Their stumps gave ample testimony in the tray at his side; and after the first he did not use a match. Neither will I chronicle how long it took him to consume them. The statement would not be credited. Leastways he still sat so, the curly blue cloud, thicker now, lifting just perceptibly above his head when came the interruption: the almost timid buzz of the electric door bell.

"Puff, puff," smoked on the man.

"Buzz-z," went the bell; longer, boldly.

The doctor listened, but he did not stir. There was a long pause; then:

“ Buzz-z-z-z,” with insistence unmistakable.

This time the man arose, groped his way through the darkened vestibule, placed his lips close to the glass.

“ Follow around the path to the right,” he called. “ This door is locked.”

There was no answer; but listening a moment later the doctor heard the diminishing tap of a rapid step on the gravelled tar.

Like the vestibule, the kitchen was dark when Watson opened the door; so dark that he could barely detect the outline of the one who entered, could not distinguish the face at all; but it was unnecessary. There is a sixth sense which tells us many things. He closed the door gently.

“ Miss Berkeley,” he said.

“ Bruce Watson,” she echoed.

They stood so there in the darkness; the man waiting, the woman—what?

“ Aren’t you going to invite me in, doctor?” asked a voice.

“ Will you come to the library, Miss Berkeley?” responded an echo.

“ Thank you. Yes.”

The host led the way silently, turned on added light, indicated with a nod the easiest chair; but did not himself sit down. Again he waited.

On the woman’s head was a filmy, feathery some-

thing, impossible for a man to describe, impossible for another woman to delineate without envy, by courtesy called a hat. About her shoulders was another something even more fragile and elusive. Compressed, it might have filled a man's palm. Very deliberately she removed both, held them equivocally in her hand.

"I received your note this evening," she initiated. "Will you kindly lay these," extending the fairy trifles, "on the table or somewhere?"

Watson complied, came back as before.

"I wasn't surprised much," chatted on his companion, "after what took place—and I'm all ready. I've a trunk packed with a few things I'll want sometime; but if you're going light we can send for it later. I don't suppose I'll need many dresses out there anyway; and in the morning before we start you can tell me just what I'll want for the present."

Watson sat down, selected a fresh cigar, lit it in silence.

"The rest of my things are to be stored." Two brown arms, bare to the elbow in their half sleeves, locked behind the visitor's head. "The house seemed lonesome when I left it; and Erma—she's my maid, you know—cried. I thought she was only afraid of me, but she actually cried and begged to go along." The dark eyes went to her companion, lingered on his face peculiarly. "Could we—possibly take her along, Bruce? I told her not; but—but she hates so much to leave me."

Impassive apparently as an Indian the man smoked on. For any indication he gave to the contrary he might not have heard a word, might have been alone.

Beneath the woman's dark head the two hands met, locked tightly. Just for a second a soft lip trembled, caught itself repressedly.

"It's been terribly hot here this summer," tensely, "almost as hot as New York, and I can hardly wait to get away. I've been thinking of the prairies every day, how cool it must be there nights, how it must sound to hear a tent flapping over one's head or the curtains of a prairie schooner. I've tried to fancy what buffalo grass smells like. You know you tried to tell me once; but—but—— Bruce"—of a sudden the bare arms shot out imploringly, the repressed voice became a wail, a prayer—"don't sit there like that. Speak to me; in God's name speak to me. I can't stand this any longer. Speak to me!"

For the first time the man turned. The cigar left his lips and he looked into the dark passionate face steadily; like a fate. For a moment he did not utter a sound, only looked at her; then like an athlete before a supreme effort he drew a long breath.

"There's nothing I can say, Miss Berkeley, more than I said that last morning we met. God knows, if," slowly, "there is a God,—I wish there were something more. I wouldn't have told you I was going in the morning if I hadn't promised; and we'd both have been spared—this. I'd simply have gone and then—time would have done the rest." He breathed deep

again; his free hand tightened on the arm of his chair. "What you suggest is impossible. You can't go with me; go as I am going, live as I shall live. The idea is madness, Miss Berkeley, madness."

The woman's black eyes did not waver. She had expected this, was prepared.

"But I am going, Bruce Watson. Nothing is impossible after it's done. As surely as you go to-day I'm going with you. You can't prevent it. I've decided. I am going."

The man dropped the glowing stump into the tray. His arms folded across his chest; but he said nothing.

"I told you before," passionately, "I'd ask nothing, and I won't. I'm strong and healthy—as Nature herself. I can stand any life that you can stand—and I will. I simply won't give you up, won't let you pass out of my life until you give me a reason; and you haven't yet. Can't you understand, Bruce? You've got to take me along. It's inevitable. I absolutely won't stay behind."

Even yet the man said nothing. He merely looked away. That was all.

Not so with the woman. She arose swiftly, came forward, compelled his attention.

"I repeat, you've given no adequate reason," she voiced. "Give one now and I'll go. I'm not mad; I'm merely human. I've lived a lifetime in the last few years and I've grown wiser. I love you, Bruce Watson, repressedly primitive as you are, love you as the first woman loved the first man; and you, down

in your inmost soul, care for me a little, more than you'll admit even to yourself. How I know this I can't tell. We women are creatures of instinct, and instinct tells me it's so. To hint that because we both lived life as we found it before we met, we must go on living it apart, is a farce. To conform to a convention which demands that I must wait until you awake, come to me—is mockery. We're living to-day. The future is a blank. Let's make the most of the now. The last remnants of your past are dead. You buried them irrevocably a few hours ago. There can't be a reason, an adequate reason, why I shouldn't go with you. There can't."

Just perceptibly the man stirred.

"Can't?" gently.

"Yes, can't. To do what you did and still love her—— It's impossible."

Distinctly this time the man moved. His great bushy head indicated his companion's former seat.

"Sit down, please," he requested.

The woman hesitated, her breath coming fast.

"Please sit down," repeated.

Against her will Flora Berkeley complied. The intangible something in that impressive man to which human after human had succumbed, compelled. For the first time in their checkered acquaintance she recognised to the full her own impotence, his dominance absolute. Of a sudden a great sob struggled in her throat; but she choked it back. After a time maybe; but not yet, not until—— He was speaking.

"Did you happen, Miss Berkeley, to notice anything particular on the corner as you were passing?" irrelevantly.

She could not believe her ears.

The query was repeated word for word.

"No," she said.

"Not the arc and the beetles?"

"Yes," gropingly, "I saw them. I couldn't help it."

"How they wanted the light, wanted it so much that—— You noticed the ground beneath?"

"Yes," again. She began to understand now.

The long face softened almost unbelievably.

"Did it occur to you how like human beings they were; how blindly, unreasonably rebellious because they couldn't have what they wanted? Do you fancy you are alone in wanting the unattainable, my friend?"

The woman sank back in her chair. Her eyes closed. At last she understood all.

"You mean you still care for her?" she said monotonously.

"Yes."

"After what she has done in the past, after what she was willing, exultant to do yesterday? I know everything, Bruce. I called on her myself to make sure. After all that you still care for her?"

"Yes. I am as nature made me. I still care for her."

For a moment the woman remained so, passive;

then of a sudden she roused. The black eyes opened wide.

"Nevertheless, you've lost her, lost her love as irrevocably as though she were buried. Those are her own words, Bruce Watson; as irrevocably as though she were buried."

"Yes," simply.

"And you have no other love; you told me so once."

"No. I have none other."

Despite her effort to prevent the questioner's dark face flamed.

"Yet you have a friendship. You just called me friend, and long ago you said friendship was very, very near—you've not forgotten?"

"No, I've not forgotten."

"Isn't it possible, then," swiftly, significantly, "more than possible——"

Interrupting, Watson arose; not deliberately, but almost precipitately. In the repressed silence of a caged wild thing he strode back and forth, back and forth; the floor throbbing under his heavy tread. At last he stopped.

"I've thought of that; thought of everything. As a friend I like you. More than friendship—I've tried to convince myself, tried honestly, that my feeling was more; but in my own mind I know it was sophistry. I can't lie to you, Flora Berkeley. What the future holds in store nature's God alone knows; but now—I do not love you now."

In a flash the woman was likewise standing facing him.

"You admit then," her eyes were very bright, "that I am more to you than other women, that there is a possibility in future—a possibility——"

"Yes, Miss Berkeley, a possibility."

The brown fingers were clasping and unclasping repressedly.

"Where, then, is your adequate reason for my not going with you, Bruce Watson? I ask nothing of you now, will ask nothing in future save to be with you. Where is the reason?"

For a long half minute the man did not answer. Human nature is very like in this world of ours, and the identical plea of another brown little woman was very fresh in his memory.

"The reason, Miss Berkeley," steadily, "is because you and I are not the first man and the first woman. We laugh at convention, in the abstract ignore it; but in the concrete it rules our lives. Search the world over and there's not a place free from its tyranny. The range country seems deserted, unpopulated, comparatively it is so. We might travel there for days and never see a white face; but eventually we would meet our fellows and then—you know as well as I what would be the first question asked then; know also how well either of us lie. We could no more live as you suggest there than here. Rough as those men are, they'd brand you unclean; brand you quicker than though you were in the heart of

New York. Even the women who live similar lives would despise you. You can't conceive now what it would mean; but you'd discover full quickly. You might do it, we might do it; but the price would be too great. Life itself would be dear at such price."

Wearily, desperately wearily, the woman moved forward until she leaned against the desk. She thought she had considered everything; but this—no, she had not before thought of this. She was travelling in a circle and back where she started from; and hopeless—almost.

"I don't doubt you, Bruce," she halted. "I understand the reason now, the adequate reason—your reason." She looked up almost timidly. "I can't go with you, I see that, but I can wait. You can go, as you intended, and when you come back, then——" She halted; something in the other's look compelled.

"Do you fancy, Miss Berkeley," soberly, "I would come back? Fancy if I once permitted myself to listen to the call of the wild I would ever return?"

Blind terror gripped anew at the woman's throat, spoke in her gaze.

"Yes. For my sake you would, wouldn't you, Bruce?"

Very gently the great bushy head shook negation.

"No, I repeat, I can't lie to you. I know myself and realise I'd never return. Once I might have done so, but not now. I know this double-faced life of civilisation too well, hate it too much." For a second the same look which had confronted John Ingley

flashed in his eyes. "It's useless to try to explain to you, for you wouldn't understand. Money and ambition mean nothing to me; what I want is solitude, nature. I'm like a child crying for its mother, a Christian calling for his God. You'll laugh at me, but I can't breathe even here sometimes. I wake up at night with the roll of a pony beneath me, the patter of its feet on the sod in my ears, the rush of the wind in my face, the smell of the wild in my nose. More than once I've locked my door and thrown the key into the darkest corner to keep from going then. It will always be so. I'll never change; any more than the colour of my eyes will change. Once free, I'd never return, Flora Berkeley, never." He dropped back in his chair, staring straight before him; his great jointed hands lying listless in his lap.

A minute, minutes passed. Then of a sudden, interrupting, harsh always, harsher now by contrast with the silence, sounded a single note: the lone call of an early-awakened cat-bird from the maple tree just outside the open window. The nights were very short and it was already almost morning. Responsive the woman straightened. She had tried logic, tried reason—and failed. One thing alone she had not tried. Whether she had the right to this last appeal, whether any human being had the right, she did not consider. She was desperate; fighting for something beside which life itself was a worthless, paltry thing. Slowly she moved forward, touched the other on the shoulder.

"You must not go, then," she said.

The man looked up.

"I say you must never go," she repeated.

Not a muscle of the long face quivered, not an eyelid.

"Do you realise what you are asking," queried a voice, "realise what it will mean to me?"

"Yes."

"And realise what it will mean to yourself, not now, but when you have had time to think?"

"Yes," again.

Once more the cat-bird called. The electric light over the desk began to look dull and greyish.

"I can't misunderstand you." Still the man did not stir. "You mean I shall renounce everything I care for, live on here or elsewhere as I'm living now. You," steadily, "mean I shall marry you?"

"Yes, I mean you shall marry me, Bruce Watson."

For a long time they looked at each other; as they had never looked before, as gazes a scientist who seeks the mystery of life. It was the man who first moved. Deliberately this time he arose, straightened to his full height.

"Pardon me, Miss Berkeley," he voiced gently, "but I must ask you a question. You may do as you wish about answering; but at least I must ask it. Have I to-night or at any former time, by word or act, given you the right to demand what you did just demand? If I have, I wish to know; if not, you need not answer."

There was a long pause; but the woman said never a word.

"One other thing." No trace of offence was in the voice nor of condemnation; only a great seriousness. "John Ingley, Doctor Ingley, wishes me to do certain things; more than wishes, begs me to do them. I saw him last evening. He—— Do you know what he wishes, Miss Berkeley?"

With the instinctive motion of a child the woman's hands went to her face, for a moment covered it.

"Yes," she confessed, "I saw him too. I know everything, Bruce."

With the old, old involuntary trick the man's arms folded across his chest. His great chin lifted in air.

"We understand each other, then," he said. "I have but one more question to ask. Look at me, please."

The woman glanced up; haltingly, fearfully. To the bottom of her soul she felt the scrutiny of those masterful, child-wide eyes.

"Once upon a time," began the man evenly, "I took it upon myself to judge another man and to sentence him by the will of the woman who loved him. He who judges others should be willing by the same standard to be himself judged. I accept. Your will shall be my will, for right or wrong; but first, just another word." He paused, but he did not stir. He scarcely seemed to breathe. "This is not the climax of a story book, Flora Berkeley, but life, real life. The thing you decide now we both must live;

day by day, year by year. After you choose the decision is irrevocable. I neither extol nor condemn divorce in others; every human being is a law unto itself; but for me there is no separation possible. If I marry you it will be until death. I shall give you no cause for protest; I shall consider no cause adequate myself. Don't turn away, please. I was never so serious in my life—and this is my last word: You know, as well as you can ever understand, what it means for me to remain here. You know without parley that you could not, would not, live out of civilisation for a single year, that my residence therein would be inevitable. You know that whatever the future holds, that now, while you make your decision, I care for you only as a friend. With this in mind, as you know life, as you love me, do you still feel the same, still wish me to marry you? I shall not ask you again. I shall abide by your decision. Look me fair in the eyes and answer, Flora Berkeley."

The voice halted and silence fell; silence so deep that to the woman the sound of her own pulse-beat rang in her ears as a distant storm. The light of morning had become positive now, filtered softly into the room; but neither noticed, neither cared. At first but one thought was in Flora Berkeley's mind; the supreme irrevocability of this question she was to answer, its absolute finality. She had attended a country funeral once; a funeral without affectation or the pomp of wealth. In a flash of memory the recollection returned to her now; the silent watchers,

the bare-headed pastor, the dropping, dropping of the clods on the coffin below. She caught her breath. It was all so like the question she was to answer; the question which—of a sudden, inevitably insistent, the present intruded. Again with a quick intake of breath came the first realisation of the extent of the boon proffered; came conception of its completeness absolute. Swift as thought followed a vision of the tender rejected, of renunciation. She recalled the past summer; the long, long, lonely summer. Her whole being rose in revolt at the memory. In a flood the hot blood returned, tingled to her finger tips. She loved this man; loved him. Was that not justification sufficient for acceptance—sufficient for anything? In an abandon she thrust every other consideration aside; every thought of the sacrifice the proffer meant, every shadowy doubt of future. She was selfish wholly, sublimely, obviously selfish; but with the instinctive egoism which prompts a parent to bring into the world a child. She remembered only that the man she loved was very near, that he was awaiting her answer, that he was hers, hers—hers for all time by a single word. Her dark face flamed afresh. Her throat throbbed until she could scarcely speak. She stepped forward; threw out her bare arms passionately.

“Bruce,” she cried, “Bruce Watson!”

One of the man's hands lifted detainingly; but not in a muscle otherwise did he stir.

“Answer me first, please. Let me hear you say it. You wish it so?”

The woman halted; but her eyes did not falter.

"Yes," she said. "I wish it so."

"And you will never regret—never?"

"No," tensely. "As God is my judge, never!"

The man's hand dropped, and instinctively the woman took another step forward; but for the last time he halted her.

"Not yet, please—not for a moment." His long, thin face softened, softened as no human being would have believed possible. Into the blue eyes crept a look akin to fear; of wonder unspeakable. "I wish to think; to realise it all. You care for me so much you wish to do this thing; knowing all, you still wish to marry me; me, Bruce Watson!—Is it possible you love me so much, Flora Berkeley? Am I, is any man, worth it, worth such love?"

"Worth it!" In abandon absolute the woman was beside him. "Worth it!" Her arms were about his neck, her glorious dark head on his shoulder. "Worth it!" again repeated. "Don't ever speak that question to me again; don't ever suggest it. I don't dare look you in the face yet as it is. It is I, if either, who should put that query, Bruce Watson." Her lithe body pressed close; throbbingly close. So long repressed, the hot tears came to her eyes uncontrollably. Her voice trembled. "I can't justify myself, can't justify anything. I only know I have you, have you irrevocably. Know this and that I love you, man; love you, love you!" She was silent.

